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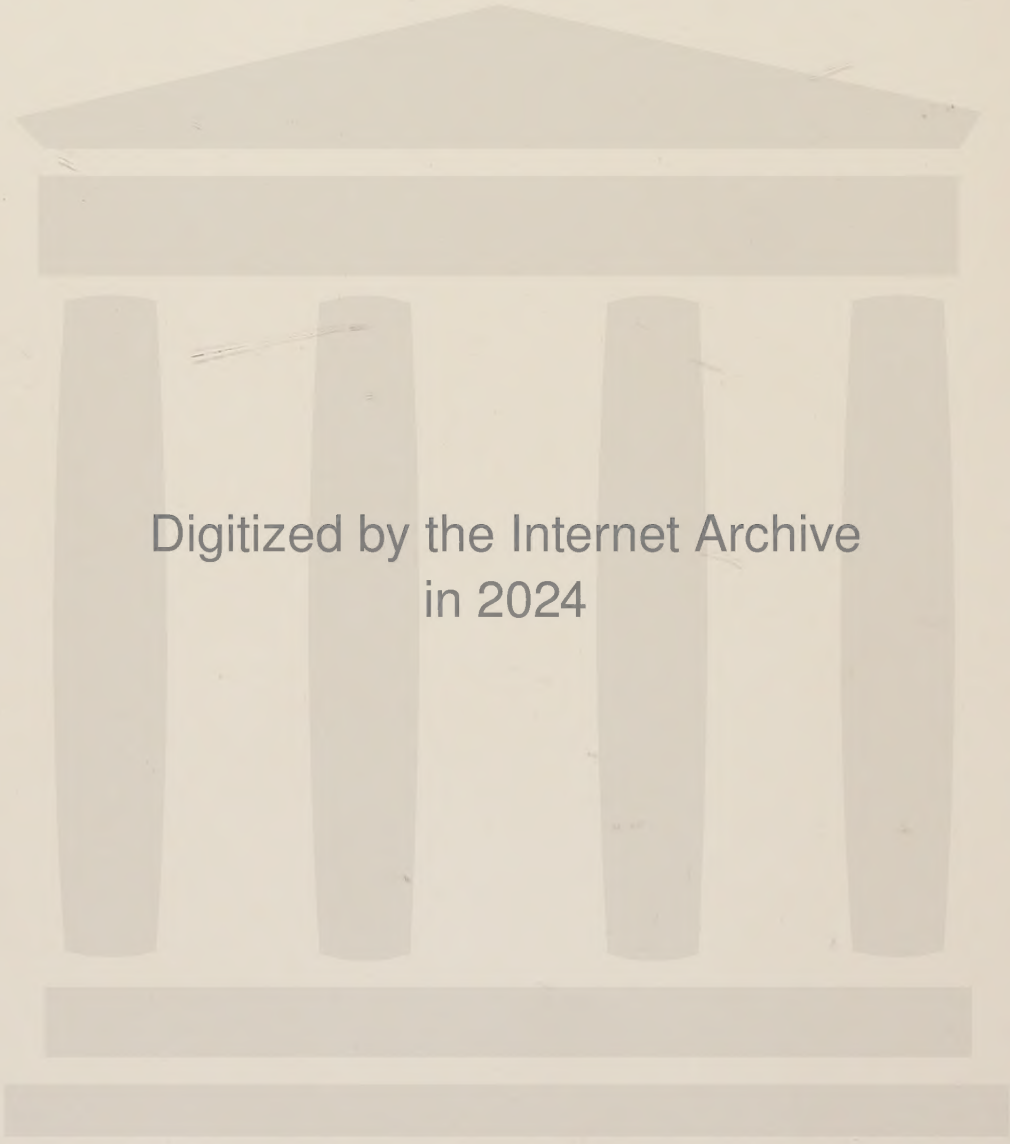
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GYPSY FOLK TALES

by M. Voříšková

ILLUSTRATED

BY MÍLA DOLEŽELOVÁ

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Kalo Dant and the Seventh World

Kalo Dant was a gypsy boy. He had roamed the world with his tribe ever since the day he was born. As he grew up, he came to know many foreign lands, and by the time he was twenty he had already seen so many that he could scarce believe he would ever see another new one in the days to come. He thought the tribe must soon reach the place where the world ended. But Kalo Dant was filled with great curiosity; he liked travelling and always wanted to be seeing something new.

When he learned that God had created seven worlds, just like ours, placed one on top of the other, he was very pleased.

'So I won't have to return to places I've been before when I reach the end of the world,' he thought to himself happily. And he began asking everyone how he could get to those upper worlds. The gypsies just laughed at him. 'No one can get to the upper worlds, because they're divided from one another by solid celestial vaults!'

Now, long before Kalo Dant's time, God had been angry with the gypsies because they were lazy, and He had driven them from their lands. He had also lifted the skies high above our world so that the gypsies could not steal his clouds.

'Just look how high the sky is!' said the gypsies to Kalo Dant, pointing to it. 'Only a bird could fly as high as that. And in the end even a bird would bash its wings against the solid vault of the heavens!'

Kalo Dant lay on his back in the grass, looking at the sky while he sucked at a straw. 'True, the sky is high. But some of the mountains are high too, their tops get lost in the clouds. If a man were to climb one of them, I wonder whether up at the top he would find his head was in the world above us?' He thought the idea seemed pretty sensible, but he didn't tell anyone else about it. He just decided that he would set out by himself for one of those mountains, climb it and see if he could succeed in getting to another world.

He strapped up his bundle, stole away from the camp and set off towards a high mountain whose peak was lost in the clouds. When he reached it, he began climbing the steep sides, clambering up, and springing over the rocks and crevices like a mountain goat, for he was still young and agile.

Finally he got so high, that he found himself enveloped up to the waist in thick white mist. 'That surely must be a cloud!' he thought. He stretched his arm up to see if he could

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touch the solid celestial arch yet, but he couldn't feel anything solid. He was fearful lest he would fall into an abyss in that mist, so he decided to rest a while. He sat down and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke the mist had vanished. But whether what he saw around him was that other world or not, it was certainly a terribly barren and unpleasant place — not a tree or a bush or even a tiny flower, just bare black rocks and cliffs.

He got up and went a bit farther, and suddenly what should he see — a tree! So something did grow here after all! Yet what a strange tree it was — it soared up and up — straight and slender right to the sky. However hard he tried, Kalo Dant just could not see the top of it. Nor could he see whether the tree had any branches or leaves.

'I'll shin up it,' he said to himself and he began climbing. He climbed and climbed, till he got quite tired. Then he paused for a moment to get his breath, and looked up. Indeed, the sky was almost within arm's reach. Yet still he couldn't see the end of the trunk. But there was something else he could see. He blinked with surprise and rubbed his eyes, reddened and half-blinded as they now were by the sun, which seemed to be glowing only a few feet above his head. And still he saw this strange thing! Believe it or not, it was a slipper! A quite ordinary battered old slipper. Was it just stuck there in the air, or was it perhaps hanging from something? No, it was on a foot — a human foot — which was rather dark-skinned and bare and looked to Kalo Dant just like one of his own.

He looked a bit higher and saw a gypsy sitting above him. He felt much better at this discovery, and grinned at him cheerfully. The gypsy grinned back and said, 'I was beginning to think you would never get here, Kalo Dant!'

'You know me?' asked Kalo Dant in amazement.

'I should think I do, why I've been waiting for you here all this time,' said the fellow from above.

'And why?'

'Well, you see, I knew you would take it into your head to take a look at the world above us, and I wanted to help you.'

'But why?' asked Kalo Dant in wonderment again.

'Because it will be easier that way than watching you all the time to make sure you don't fall anywhere and break your neck,' said the gypsy gruffly. 'You see, I'm your guardian angel.'

'You could have fooled me,' shouted Kalo Dant. 'And where are your wings?'

'We gypsy guardian angels don't have wings glued to our shoulders like the guardians of the white-skinned races,' explained the dark-skinned angel. 'We have winged feet.'

Kalo Dant looked curiously at the bare foot hanging there in the slipper. For an angel it might have been a bit cleaner, but he couldn't see anything else strange about it.

'That's my wing!' said the dark angel, wriggling his big toe inside the old slipper. 'This is no ordinary slipper,' he went on, 'though it may look like one. It's getting a bit worn now from all the wear I've given it these last few thousand years. But it has the magic power of being able to carry me hither and thither, wherever I wish, and it does so more swiftly than the swiftest bird's wings.'

'That's the sort of thing I will be needing,' sighed Kalo Dant.

'Well, I'll lend you my slipper,' said the angel, 'but you must promise you'll kick it off as soon as you reach the next world. I can't carry out my duties without it.' Kalo Dant promised willingly.

So the dark angel stretched out his leg and told Kalo Dant to pull the slipper off and put it on his own foot. The moment he had done so, Kalo Dant started floating up in the air. He rose at such speed, that he was quite frightened. Suddenly he came to a halt. He felt firm ground beneath his feet. And then he noticed that crowds of people were running towards him from all sides, and they were all gypsies.

There were many children among them, and Kalo Dant loved children. He searched

his pockets to see whether he could find some kind of sweet, a coloured button or at least some scrap of paper to give them, but there was nothing. Then he remembered his promise to the angel and hastily kicked off the slipper.

The children shouted with delight and fell on it, thinking no doubt that the stranger was giving them the slipper as a present. But the magic slipper began darting about, slipping between their hands more swiftly than a snake, and before they knew what had happened, it was gone.

The children were disappointed, and Kalo Dant tried to explain that it wasn't his fault that the slipper ran away, but he realised they didn't understand a word he said. The language spoken by the gypsies who surrounded him was completely strange to him. Luckily, they behaved in a friendly way, slapping him on the back and grinning at him.

They led him to a small wooden hut standing in a little garden. In the garden was a bench and on it sat an old, old gypsy. He was so old that his face was deeply furrowed and his skin was like yellow parchment. His hair and beard were long and white as milk, but his black eyes sparkled with youthful fire. When the crowd arrived, he stood up, smiled and said:

'Welcome to you, stranger!'

'You speak my language,' said Kalo Dant joyfully.

'I speak as many languages as I am years of age,' replied the old man, 'and as I am ninety-nine years old, I know ninety-nine languages, which means — except for the language I haven't learned yet — all the languages of all the seven worlds.'

'And which don't you know yet?' asked Kalo Dant.

'The language of the birds, my son,' replied the old gypsy. 'The most beautiful and the hardest of them all. But in a year's time, by the time I'll be a hundred, I will know that, too. Where have you come from?'

Kalo Dant told him truthfully just where he had come from and how he had got there. When he had finished, the old man said:

'Curiosity is the first step in the ladder which we call knowledge. Now that you are here, you ought to try to learn something from us.'

'Gladly,' said Kalo Dant, 'and I think you are just the person from whom I could learn a lot. May I stay with you awhile? Don't be afraid that I'll eat your bread and give nothing in return; I want to work.'

The old man agreed, and Kalo Dant remained there with him.

On the next day, Kalo Dant noticed that the wood-pile in the yard was getting low, so he offered to go to the forest and cut some fresh wood for the old man.

'It's not as easy as all that, my lad,' said the old fellow. 'First of all you'll have to learn the language of the trees.'

'You mean the trees can speak?' said Kalo Dant in amazement.

'Of course they can, only so quietly that people don't even notice it,' replied the old man. 'Some trees speak, and those are living. Others don't, because they are dead, and one may chop them down. I'll come to the forest with you and show you which trees you may fell and which you may not.'

They went to the forest, and it was just as he had said. When the old man spoke to some of the trees, they answered; others didn't. Kalo Dant felled the silent ones and while he sawed the wood and chopped off the branches, the wise old man taught him the language of living trees.

So Kalo Dant lived in this way with the old man for a whole year. During that time he learned a great many things, but one day the old man said to him:

'Well, Kalo Dant, what you've learned you know now. I can't teach you any more, as my time is spent. Today I shall be one hundred years old to the very day and hour — I now know also the hundredth and final language — the language of the birds. You must leave me and return home.'

'But how can I?' said Kalo Dant dejectedly. 'Besides, since I'm here already, it's certainly nearer to the worlds above us — and I wouldn't like to return before I've come to know them all. Can't you advise me how I can best reach them?'

'As for that, I can give you some advice all right,' replied the old man, 'but I'm not sure how much use it will be to you. If you traverse the forest where we saw the live and dead trees, you will come to a meadow. Sit down there and wait till somebody comes. But I warn you in advance, the place is very deserted and hardly anyone ever passes that way. If anyone does come, however, they will surely be able to tell you how to reach the next world.'

Kalo Dant thanked him kindly, took his leave and departed. He traversed the forest, came to the meadow, sat down and waited. But no one came. Night fell and he lay down in the grass and fell asleep. In the morning he awoke — again no one. He waited and waited. The day passed, and not a soul appeared. It was the same the next day. On the third day Kalo Dant was half dead with hunger, but he decided he would rather die than return with his task unfinished. Whereupon he lay down in the grass and closed his eyes once more. And all of a sudden he heard a voice above him.

'Stand up, Kalo Dant!'

He was taken by surprise, jumped up and saw before him the tall fair figure of an old man with a long white beard. And as he looked at him, he was seized with such holy awe that he fell on his knees and bowed his head.

'So you have taken it into your head to look at all my worlds, have you?' asked the venerable old man severely. 'And did it not occur to you, you miserable mortal, that if

I separated them from each other to prevent people like you from running from one to the other, that I probably knew why I was doing it?'

Whereupon Kalo Dant knew that this was not a man, but the Creator of the Seven Worlds Himself. He remained silent a while and then said, 'Curiosity, oh Lord, is an evil thing. It is like thirst. If a man doesn't want to die of thirst, he must dig himself a well. Some people are clever; they know at once where to find water in the ground and they have tools with which to dig. Others are more foolish — they know nothing and have nothing. But even the fool must drink. If he has no tools, he must dig with his bare hands.'

'That was well said, Kalo Dant,' said God. 'You people are very inquisitive, but that is right. He who asks no questions learns nothing, and he who does not seek finds nothing. You have asked and sought. That pleases me and I will help you. But listen well and think it over before you give your answer. I will allow you to look at all the worlds, but I won't help you to get back. That you will have to manage by yourself. Do you accept such terms?'

'Yes, I do,' answered Kalo Dant.

Whereupon the Lord waved His hand and Kalo Dant rose up into the air, up and up, higher and higher. And that was how Kalo Dant landed on the third world. He roamed about it for some time, had a good look at it, but soon discovered that it did not differ much from the first two. There was only one difference — there seemed to be fewer people inhabiting it. He hardly met a soul on his wanderings. And when he soared to the fourth world, he found there were even fewer people. By the time he reached the fifth and sixth worlds he was quite sure that the higher the world, the fewer the people that lived on its surface.

Finally, he found himself in the last, the Seventh World. Here there were only bare mountains and cliffs, and endless forests and luxurious meadows, where herds of animals were pasturing. Above them flew all kinds of birds in great flocks.

In none of the lower worlds had Kalo Dant seen such vast numbers of birds. And the insects! There were white clouds of them, they flew low over the ground, buzzing around and stinging him faster than he could chase them away.

I wouldn't like to stay here, Kalo Dant thought to himself, and then he suddenly remembered that he had no idea whether or how he would get away from the place. He felt very hot. The sun hung quite low above his head, and it was so scorching that he soon threw off his shirt and all the rest of his clothes. He stretched himself out in the shade of an enormous tree, just as naked as the day God made him.

Suddenly he noticed it was getting darker. Looking up at the sky, he saw a dark red cloud passing in front of the fiery ball of the sun. It's going to rain, he thought with relief.

And indeed, a moment later the first drops fell on his face. But what rain! The water was hot, so hot that when it touched his skin it almost burnt him.

He jumped up and sought shelter. The tree under which he had lain had a thick crown. So Kalo Dant climbed the trunk and hid himself among the leaves. Suddenly he heard a plaintive squawking. He glanced up to the top of the tree and saw a large bird's nest.

No wonder they're complaining, poor babies, he thought compassionately; this fiery rain will destroy such small fledglings. He climbed up swiftly to the very top and found seven large, but as yet unfeathered, fledglings in the nest. He threw his shirt over them, crouched down and waited for the rain to stop.

At last it did, and Kalo Dant stretched out his hand to take his shirt. But at that moment a large black bird was circling the treetop. The span of its wings was so great that it completely veiled the sun. The bird alighted on the edge of the nest and spoke with a human voice:

'Thank you for saving my children. You are in the Land of Birds, and I am their King. How can I reward you for this?'

'Probably best by advising me how to get away from here,' answered Kalo Dant. 'Couldn't you perhaps carry me down to one of the lower worlds, where people live?'

'That's not possible, I'm afraid,' said the King of the Birds. 'But I can give you one of my subjects, who will. He's known as Dragon Sharkan. Climb down and I'll take you to him!'

When Kalo Dant reached the ground, the King of the Birds circled low over his head and said:

'Now pull out one of my tail-feathers!'

Kalo Dant did as he was bid and the King of the Birds soared up with him and showed him the way.

Suddenly Kalo Dant saw a mountain ahead. In front of it was a meadow, where a herd of cattle was pasturing. The King of the Birds flew down and alighted, saying:

'This is Salt Mountain. Inside there is a cave and that's where Sharkan lives. The cattle you see are his. Go to the cave and call Sharkan by name. When he emerges, order him to destroy all his cattle. Then skin the animals, gut them, cut them up in pieces and preserve them in salt. Then make two large barrels from wood which you'll find in the forest. Put salted meat in one and drinking water in the other. Tie both the vats to a long pole, which you must yoke behind Sharkan's neck, and seat yourself in the centre of it. He will carry you down to whichever of the lower worlds you choose.'

'Even to the lowest?' asked Kalo Dant. He had had enough of roaming and wanted to get home.

'Yes,' agreed the King of the Birds. 'Should he for some reason want to disobey,

just show him my feather, or tap him lightly with it. You'll tame him at once that way.'

The King of the Birds took his leave and flew off.

Kalo Dant went up to the cave and called Sharkan's name. The dragon heaved himself out and looked round threateningly. He measured a good fifteen feet from head to tail, and fire blazed from his nostrils.

Up to this time no dragons had yet been seen in our world. And if it hadn't been for Kalo Dant, perhaps no dragon would ever have reached us. So when Kalo Dant first saw him, he got a good fright. Indeed, Sharkan was not a pleasant sight and, what's more, he didn't even try to look a bit friendly. But when the dragon saw the King of the Birds' feather, he said politely, 'I am your servant; what am I to do for you?'

Kalo Dant ordered him to do just as the Bird King had said. He helped him a bit with the slaughtering of the cattle and so they more or less became friends. When they had a sufficient store of meat, Kalo Dant made the two barrels, filled one with meat, the other with drinking water and then told the dragon to carry him to the lowest world.

'That's terribly far away,' said the dragon irritably, but as soon as Kalo Dant touched him lightly on the back with the feather, he stopped making excuses and set off.

The journey lasted long, ever so long. Not just because the dragon had to cover the tremendous distances between the various worlds, but also because it always took him quite a while to find a hole in the solid celestial arch bored through by the peak of some great mountain or other. Fortunately they had enough meat and drinking water with them. Whenever Sharkan felt hungry or thirsty, Kalo Dant would take a chunk of meat from the barrel and put it in one of Sharkan's claws or tip the barrel of water over towards his mouth.

Finally, both barrels were empty and Sharkan began to get restless. He would swish his tail more and more often, and Kalo Dant only just managed to remain seated on his back. When he realised that the dragon was doing it on purpose, he began to feel hot under the gills. Then he remembered the Bird King's tail feather, pulled it out and stroked it several times up and down the dragon's back. Sharkan was tamed at once and continued the flight more amiably.

But everything finally comes to an end, and so it was that suddenly, as Kalo Dant was looking down, he saw a landscape that he recognised. It was the spot where, long ago, he had begun his climb up the mountain.

When Sharkan landed on the mountainside, Kalo Dant slid from his back and heaved a great sigh of relief.

'Thank you,' he said to Sharkan, 'so now we're home again.'

'You mean, you're home all right, but I can't say that I am.'

'True, but you'll go back now, and all will be well,' said Kalo Dant.

'But how can I get back?' asked the dragon.

'Why, you've got wings and surely you'll find the way?' replied Kalo Dant.

'And will you get me meat and water for the journey?' asked Sharkan.

Kalo Dant scratched behind his ear. To get large supplies of meat for the dragon's journey would not be as easy in this world as in his. Here all the cattle belonged to the farmers, and they didn't give anything away for nothing. When the gypsies, who themselves were poor, relieved them now and again of a chicken or a sheep, the farmers ran straight for the magistrate. My, what a hullabaloo they'd make if Kalo Dant were to steal as many cattle as the dragon would need for his journey.

'You know what?' he said after a moment. 'You wait here. I'll go and ask my people for advice, and we'll see how we can get you some meat.'

But Sharkan didn't like the idea.

'I don't like to be left here alone,' he said. 'I feel all out of place in this world. Besides, by now I am so desperately hungry, I could eat a whole herd of cattle on the spot.'

'You'll have to last out a little longer,' said Kalo Dant. 'There's a large cave here in this mountain; I'll show you the way and you can wait there till I get back. But you mustn't show yourself outside. People would be frightened!'

Sharkan still didn't like the idea. So Kalo Dant pulled out the feather and threatened the dragon with it, and straightaway he crawled obediently into the cave to which Kalo Dant had led him and promised he would wait there till Kalo Dant returned.

You'll learn how he kept that promise in the next tale.

How Sharkan Made Mischief

When the news got round to the gypsy camp that Kalo Dant had returned from his journey to the Seven Worlds, everyone turned out to welcome him. One celebration after another was held in his honour. There was just no end to the welcoming, questioning and telling of the tale. The fires burned long into the night and Kalo Dant had to tell the full story of all his experiences. He told them everything, possibly adding just a tiny bit more than the plain truth for good measure, but he never said a word about Sharkan, imputing all the credit for his safe return home to his own wise head. And since he didn't speak about the dragon, it is not surprising that he even began to forget about it a bit.

It was not till about a week later that his conscience began troubling him. What would Sharkan be thinking of him? Perhaps nothing, because meanwhile, poor soul, he would have died of hunger. But what could Kalo Dant have done about it? Following these long drawn-out celebrations the gypsy camp had been scraped bare. After feasts like this, gypsies always had to tighten their belts for a time. There was nothing left over, not a chick or a lamb. Every little bone had been licked clean and sucked down to the marrow. But it turned out that Kalo Dant was burdening himself with unnecessary worries. Suddenly, strange rumours began spreading through the neighbourhood. Apparently some strange monster now lived in the mountain; it attacked the farmyards at night and stole from the cattle sheds and cow pens.

When this came to Kalo Dant's ears, he knew at once what had happened. He felt a bit better at not having Sharkan's health on his conscience. However, it wouldn't be too pleasant if the farmers learned that it had been he that had brought the voracious dragon to this world. What matter if Sharkan does take a few of their cattle, he thought; after all, they've got plenty, and Sharkan must eat.

But soon there began to be worse rumours. Apparently the monster was not satisfied with just cattle; it was beginning to steal the farmer's children, too! It had already carried off five, no one knew where.

No, that would not do, said Kalo Dant to himself. He didn't mind if Sharkan ate cattle, but children — whether gypsy or not — that was going too far! He couldn't allow that to happen.

He got up, and feeling for the Bird King's feather in his pocket, he set off for Sharkan's

cave. On arriving, he called the dragon by name, and soon the hideous dragon's head appeared in the mountain cleft. When Sharkan saw it was Kalo Dant, he blinked with great surprise.

'Well, I never — is that you? What happened to the cattle you promised to drive here for me?'

'Why should I bother to drive cattle here for you; you were getting it for yourself, weren't you!' replied Kalo Dant.

The dragon didn't even attempt to deny it. 'Certainly I did and why not? Was I to die of hunger?'

'I wanted to get you some cattle,' lied Kalo Dant, 'but I just couldn't manage it. It is something else that makes me angry. Where are the children?'

'Which children?' asked Sharkan innocently, but his eyes began to blink suspiciously.

Kalo Dant pulled out the feather and said, 'You know very well which children! So long as you only stole cattle, I held my peace, but eating children — I'll never allow you to do that, not in this world.'

'Who said I'd eaten them?' retaliated Sharkan, offended.

'Possibly not, but where are they then?'

'Come in and you'll see,' said the dragon, and he heaved a stone to one side, so that Kalo Dant could enter the cave. Once inside, at the back of the cavern he saw another cave, a smaller one lit by daylight.

'That's where the children are,' pointed the dragon. But Kalo Dant had heard them already. And the voices he heard through the opening amazed him. He looked in and saw three small boys and two girls merrily skipping around on a grass patch, surrounded on all sides by high cliffs. It was some kind of mountain cleft, the only entry to which was through Sharkan's cave.

When the children saw Kalo Dant, they ran off in all directions.

'Well, I never,' thought Kalo Dant to himself. 'I don't believe it. They're not afraid of a dragon, but they are afraid of me!' He squatted on his heels and grinned at the children, unable to say a word. When they saw he really meant no harm, they came closer.

'What do you want, gypsy?' asked the oldest boy.

'I want to set you free,' replied Kalo Dant.

'Why?' asked the boy, somewhat surprised.

'Well, don't you want to go home? Aren't you afraid of the dragon who stole you from your parents' homes?'

'We're not afraid of him,' replied the lad. 'He's a kind old chap.'

'He takes us for rides on his tail,' added the second.

'He brings us everything we want, and then plays with us,' said the third.

'He brings us apples and potatoes, then he puffs fire out of his mouth, so that we can bake them,' explained one of the little girls.

Kalo Dant was quite dumbfounded. Sharkan grinned. Finally Kalo Dant burst out, 'But why, then, did you steal them?'

'Because I am lonely on my own,' answered the dragon.

Kalo Dant turned to the children. 'You are wicked and ungrateful little things,' he told them. 'You play here happily with the dragon, and it's all the same to you that your mummies and daddies are crying their eyes out at home, thinking that something dreadful has happened to you.'

Tears started running down the cheeks of one of the little girls.'I want my mummie,' she sniffed.

'So do I,' said the other one.

'Tell them at home that we are all right,' said one of the boys.

'No, just come along with me and I'll take you back,' said Kalo Dant.

'But I don't want you to take them away,' protested Sharkan.

'Oh, don't you!' said Kalo Dant roughly and threatened him with the feather. 'Children belong to their parents. What would come of them if they stayed here? They have to go to school.'

'But we won't go with you,' said the oldest boy.

Whereupon Kalo Dant lost his temper. 'Very well, stay here, and I'll go to your parents myself and tell them where you are and that you don't want to go to school! Let them come for you themselves.' He turned on his heel and departed. Sharkan crawled after him.

'Look here, Kalo Dant,' begged the dragon, 'leave the children here with me . . . I must have someone about to talk to, I can't bear being alone.'

'No,' said Kalo Dant abruptly. 'I'm going to send you home. Now I know how to get the cattle you require for your journey.'

He went to the village and made straight for those villagers who had lost their children. They happened by chance to be the richest farmers in the neighbourhood. Calling the heads of the families together, he said, 'I know where your children are. Will each of you give me a heifer, if I tell you?'

The farmers all promised they would. So Kalo Dant told them that the children had been carried off by a dragon, who had imprisoned them in his cave. He offered to take the farmers there.

The five men armed themselves with hatchets, forks and flails, and said they would go after the dragon. But Kalo Dant said it was quite unnecessary, that he could manage the dragon alone.

'But you haven't any weapon,' said the farmers in bewilderment.

'Yes, I have,' said Kalo Dant, showing them the feather. They were even more surprised.

'How's that? You hope to overpower such a monster with a feather?'

But Kalo Dant just nodded and led them off to Sharkan's cave. There he called out, 'Children, come on out! Here are your daddies!'

The children ran out of the cave, and when they saw the villagers, they shouted with delight and ran to them. Each father embraced his child, and it was a joyful reunion. The dragon didn't even show himself.

'Where's the monster who carried you off,' asked the fathers. 'We must kill him.'

'No, oh no!' cried the children. 'We don't want you to kill him. He was kind to us and played with us.'

But the villagers insisted they must, that they couldn't have a dragon stealing their cattle.

Sharkan, who had heard what was going on from inside, suddenly roared out of the cave, rolling his eyes and shooting flame out of his mouth, so that it was a horrifying sight. The farmers took fright and drew back. But Kalo Dant went up to him and drew the feather lightly over his skin. The monster moaned woefully and hastily retreated back into the cave. The villagers were truly astonished.

'I told you I could deal with him myself,' said Kalo Dant. 'The dragon's afraid of me. If, as well as the heifers you've promised, you each give me one more bull, I will drive him away from here, and then he wouldn't steal your cattle or your children any more.'

Now that the villagers had seen the dragon, they were no longer keen to fight him and were all glad to promise Kalo Dant what he asked for. They took the children and went home. Kalo Dant went with them.

He was soon back, however, driving five fat young heifers and five bulls to the dragon's cave. He stood at the opening and called:

'Come on out, Sharkan!'

The dragon obediently crawled out and looked around most miserably.

'Here are the cattle I promised you,' said Kalo Dant. 'Kill them and I'll prepare the meat for your journey.'

'But I don't want it,' grumbled Sharkan.

'What's that? You don't want to go home?'

'No, I don't!' screeched the dragon. 'Don't drive me away, Kalo Dant. 'This world is better than mine. I've got used to it now; in fact, I like being here.'

'That's impossible,' answered Kalo Dant. 'I don't want to offend you, Sharkan, but you're not suited to our world. You devour too much and we don't have as much meat to spare here as in your world. Besides, you don't look very nice, you know. People won't want to look at you and what's more, you like company and don't want to be alone.'

'But I'll be good now,' the dragon said eagerly. 'I'll fly off somewhere, a long way away — you'll never hear of me any more.'

'I should hope not,' said Kalo Dant. 'Because as it was I who brought you here, I'm really responsible for you, you see. People would blame me if you started making mischief in the world.'

Then, as Sharkan went on beseeching him and promising that he really never would do anything disgraceful, Kalo Dant finally took pity on him. He allowed him to stay in this world and to fly where he wished, but then he said severely, 'I tell you, here and now, if ever I hear any bad tales about you, I'll never forgive you. And as you don't want to go home, I won't give you all these cattle; I'll keep half myself.'

The dragon agreed and thanked Kalo Dant very much for letting him stay in this

world, which he saw was far better than his own. But as he was now very ravenous again, he started on his half of the cattle right away. He also promised he would fly away, as soon as he had digested them.

Kalo Dant took leave of him, took his five cattle and drove them home.

For many months everything was all right. Neither children nor cattle disappeared from the neighbourhood. Kalo Dant slowly began to forget about Sharkan altogether.

Then one day, a long while after, a wandering gypsy brought a strange tale to the camp. And when Kalo Dant heard it, he immediately cocked his ears.

In a certain kingdom, far far away, the king had had a great bridge built over a river. It had taken many years to build, and when finally it was ready, the king's only daughter had begged to be the first to be allowed to cross it. The king gave his permission and the princess drove on to the bridge in a special carriage with a coachman and her lady-in-waiting. But before they had reached the middle of the bridge, a terrible monster — a good

fifteen feet long — emerged from the river, stood up on its tail, grabbed the carriage and dragged it down, together with all its passengers.

The river ran beneath a cliff where there was a cave, and that was where the monster had installed itself. The king had proclaimed a great reward for anyone who would dare to drive the monster from its lair. Apparently several brave knights had tried, but they had all suffered the same sad fate. The monster had seized every one who dared put a foot on the bridge, and all were dragged down into the cave.

'That surely can't be any other than Sharkan,' thought Kalo Dant to himself. He found the feather from the Bird King and straightway set off for the kingdom. When he arrived, he had himself led to the king and said, 'I want to liberate your daughter and the people that monster has dragged down into the cave. I want you to lend me a horse and some clothes.'

'I'm willing to lend you anything,' said the king, 'but I can't believe that a ragged-looking gypsy like you will succeed in doing what the bravest knights of my kingdom have tried in vain to do.'

'Try and you'll see,' replied Kalo Dant.

So the king ordered that the gypsy be taken to the stables to choose whichever horse he wanted. When he saw that Kalo Dant chose the best horse of all, he shook his head and said, 'Well, I see you understand horses all right!' Then he led him to his own chamber and selected a splendid knightly attire for him. And when Kalo Dant had donned the clothes, they suited him so well, that the king said, 'You look very handsome for a gypsy. Go along now and try your luck! If you succeed in liberating my daughter and the others who are imprisoned there and manage to rid the bridge of that monster, you will be very handsomely rewarded.'

Kalo Dant leaped on the horse and rode down to the bridge. The rumour that once again someone had turned up who dared to try and overcome the monster spread like wildfire round the town, and everyone hastened to see what would happen.

Kalo Dant rode on to the bridge at a gallop, but he had hardly reached the middle, when the terrible dragon's claws emerged from the water. The mighty body rose up on its tail — and the rider and his horse were dragged down.

After dragging the new dare-devil into its cave, the dragon placed him beside the others that were there already. The princess, her lady-in-waiting, the coachman and the five brave knights were alive and well, but the princess was all in tears.

'Another gentleman,' laughed the dragon. 'We'll have even more fun now.' But Kalo Dant pulled the bird's feather out of his pocket and said severely, 'So that's how you carry out your promise, is it, Sharkan?'

The dragon, who recognised him only now for the first time, was fearfully taken

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aback: 'Wha . . . Why, is that you, Kalo Dant?' he stuttered. 'Where have you come from?'

'Release the princess and all these people this instant!' ordered Kalo Dant, 'Then we'll have a word to say to one another.'

'I would have let them go anyway,' the dragon assured him earnestly. 'The princess first, because she does nothing but cry and cry . . .'

'Brave, brave knight,' cried the princess, 'if you let me free, I'll be your wife.'

Whereupon Kalo Dant took his first good look at her and decided approvingly that she was quite pretty. But out loud he replied, 'Thank you, noble princess, but I'm not a knight, just a poor gypsy. Your father lent me these clothes and his horse, otherwise I haven't a penny to my name.' Then he turned to the others, 'You can go now; I'll stay and settle things here with the dragon.'

The princess, her chambermaid, the coachman and the knights left the cave and Kalo Dant stayed behind alone with Sharkan. 'Well, what am I to do with you now, Sharkan?' he said grimly. 'I see I cannot rely on your promises. No good will ever come of your staying in this world. I'll have to send you home.'

'Just allow me to try once more, Kalo Dant,' begged the dragon repentantly. 'Nothing like this will ever happen again.'

'I don't believe you,' said Kalo Dant. 'You won't be able to resist, and after a time there'll be more trouble.'

'No, there won't,' promised the dragon. 'But there's just one thing you could do for me so that I shan't be lonely and then be tempted to steal people.'

'Really, and what would that be?' asked Kalo Dant.

'Could you just scratch me a bit behind the ear with your feather?' requested the dragon. 'If you would, a second head would grow there and my two heads would be able to talk to each other, and we wouldn't be so sad.'

'Very well,' said Kalo Dant. So he scratched the dragon behind the ear with the feather and — lo and behold! — at that instant Sharkan grew another head. The two heads began licking each other with their tongues and one of them said, 'Thank you, Kalo Dant! If you wouldn't mind, you could tickle me again behind the other ear, and I would grow a third head, and then I really never would have a sad moment.'

Kalo Dant tickled the dragon behind his other ear — and Sharkan immediately grew a third head. All three heads began shouting cheerily at one another and licking each other lovingly. Then they unanimously assured Kalo Dant that they would never take any notice of people any more and would only entertain each other. So Kalo Dant accepted their entreaties and agreed to let Sharkan remain in this world. But he ordered the dragon to leave the cave at once and fly to some far distant mountains where no one would see

him and where he would not provoke a scandal. Sharkan promised, and Kalo Dant took his leave, leapt on his horse and rode to the castle. There he was welcomed with great honour. The king thanked him profusely and said, 'My daughter has taken a liking to you and wishes to marry you.'

'That's very nice of her,' replied Kalo Dant, 'but I don't actually want to get married just yet. If you really wish to please me, give me this horse and these clothes.'

'You don't want me?' asked the princess, offended.

'You see,' explained Kalo Dant politely, 'I promised my mother I would only marry a gypsy girl.'

'As you like!' said the princess turning up her nose and turning on her heel. But the king was glad that it had worked out like that, and he presented Kalo Dant not only with the horse and the clothes, but also with a whole sack full of golden ducats.

And that really was the last Kalo Dant heard of Sharkan. He never saw him again, but from other fairy tales it is clear that Sharkan didn't give people peace. Some of them tell that he had even more than three heads. And it is possible. After a time Kalo Dant lost the feather — and who knows who found it and all the things that may have happened after that?

The Black Hen

Kalo Dant was now a rich gypsy. It was said of him that he was even richer than the King of the gypsies. Everyone knew how he had come by his riches — that he had freed a far distant country from the terrors of a dragon, that he had liberated a princess who had wanted to marry him, and that he had said no. The gypsies thought a lot of him for that, and the one who was most pleased by it all was his mother. She told him, 'You did well, son, not marrying that haughty one. I can well believe she liked you, but no good would have come of it. You couldn't even have brought her here for a visit, she would have turned up her princessly nose at us, and I would have been so worried. But now it's time you married a good gypsy girl, perhaps a poor one, but a respectable one — someone who will treat me the way she should.'

'I don't know anyone,' replied Kalo Dant sullenly.

'Just take a good look around,' advised his mother. 'All the lads of your age are married already and have children. I want to live to see my grandchildren. I'll arrange a more splendid wedding for you than the gypsies have ever seen. You've plenty of money, so what are you waiting for?'

'I'd be willing to get married, but I don't know whom to choose,' said Kalo Dant defensively, for marrying was the last thing he really wanted.

'Wander around the neighbourhood awhile and you'll see,' advised his mother. 'Don't be on the look-out for money or for beauty, although, of course, you should choose a bride that takes your fancy. But more important, see that she knows how to keep house and make sure she is not a good-for-nothing.'

Kalo Dant took her advice, saddled his horse and set off. He roamed through many a gypsy village and saw many beautiful girls, but there was none that he liked especially, above all the others.

One day he came to a tiny, poverty-stricken gypsy hamlet. It was about midday. The narrow streets between the low cottages were empty. The gypsies from the place were all working in the neighbouring farmers' fields; no one was at home. Kalo Dant got off his horse, tied it to the fence of one of the poor dwellings and looked in through the window. Inside he saw a gypsy girl. She was preparing dinner, and she was very beautiful, more beautiful than anyone he had ever seen. Her slender arms were skilfully

laying the dishes on the table, and her small bare feet seemed to be dancing, she moved so gracefully at her work. Her black raven locks fell in soft waves round her fresh young face and her big black eyes shone like midnight stars.

'She and none other will be my bride,' said Kalo Dant to himself, and he knocked on the window.

The beautiful girl looked up, saw him, cried out weakly — and at that instant disappeared. It was very strange — where could she have gone so suddenly? Kalo Dant didn't hesitate long; he went round to the door of the cottage and knocked loudly. He waited a moment and, as no one came to open, he lifted the latch. The door was not locked and he went in and found himself in a small yard. At that moment a black hen ran out of the opened door of the cottage, and with a frightened cackle, crept past him and ran away.

Kalo Dant went into the cottage and entered the room into which he had looked

through the window. The table was laid for dinner, but there was not a trace of the beautiful girl.

Presumably she has hidden somewhere, thought Kalo Dant to himself, and he went to look for her. The cottage had three rooms, but there was not a living soul in any of them.

'Well, I'm blessed,' he grumbled, 'where could she have gone?'

Suddenly the door opened and in walked two old people — an old gypsy man and an old gypsy woman — and they looked at the stranger with some surprise.

'God bless you!' Kalo Dant greeted them.

'And you, too!' answered the old gypsy man. 'What are you doing here? I don't think we know you.'

'I'm on a long journey,' replied Kalo Dant. 'May I ask you for a little refreshment? I'm hungry and thirsty.'

'We'll be very glad to entertain you,' said the old gypsy woman. 'Sit down and have dinner with us.'

Kalo Dant thanked them, sat down and dined with them. The food was very tasty and there was plenty of it. After a while he asked who cooked for them so well.

The old folk looked at one another in embarrassment and didn't answer. Kalo Dant repeated his question.

'I see you have a good housekeeper. Where is she? Call her in, so that I can thank her for this splendid dinner.'

Once again the old folk were thoroughly confused, and finally the gypsy woman said:

'We have no one, we live alone.'

'Why do you deny the existence of your daughter — or is it perhaps your granddaughter?' asked Kalo Dant. 'Are you afraid for her? I wouldn't bite her! I'm no beggar, and if she wanted me and I liked her, I would marry her.'

'We have no daughter, neither have we a grandchild,' said the old gypsy. 'What are you talking about?'

'Then who prepared the dinner for you?' asked Kalo Dant. 'When you came home, the dinner was all ready on the table.'

'Well, it's like this,' said the gypsy woman, 'You see, we don't know who prepares the food. It happened the first time about a week ago. We came home from work at midday and found the food on the table. We were amazed. The same thing happened the next day. And it's been like this now each day since. We've got accustomed to it, but we haven't the faintest idea what it all means.'

'That's not true,' cried Kalo Dant. 'Why do you try to deceive me?'

'We are not deceiving you,' replied the gypsy. 'We really do live here alone, just the

two of us. We've no idea who brings us the food each day. Perhaps some good angel of ours . . .'

'But I have seen that . . . that good angel of yours,' exclaimed Kalo Dant. The two old people looked at him with curiosity.

'You've seen him?' they both asked at once, and did so in such a sincere manner, that Kalo Dant almost began to doubt what he had seen with his own eyes.

'When I looked into this room from outside, I thought I saw a young girl,' he mumbled uncertainly.

'What did she look like?' inquired the old folk.

'She was very beautiful and she was undoubtedly a gypsy girl,' replied Kalo Dant.

'But where could she be now,' cried the gypsy woman.

'I don't know. I looked for her everywhere before you arrived, but I couldn't find anyone in the cottage at all.'

'You surely must have been dreaming,' said the old gypsy. 'We don't know any young girl who would come here every day. We are two old forsaken people.'

'Oh, I've forgotten to feed the hen,' cried the old gypsy woman suddenly, and she got up, saying, 'I must go and give it some food.'

When she had gone, the old gypsy said, 'It's a funny thing about that hen, too. It suddenly appeared about a week ago, we've no idea where from. It doesn't belong to any of the neighbours, for we asked them; and as no one claimed it, we kept it. It hasn't laid a single egg yet, but as we've always had plenty to eat from the moment it was here, we haven't killed it.'

Kalo Dant listened, and a thousand different ideas occurred to him. But he held his peace, and when the old woman returned he didn't refer to the matter again. He told the old folk about his adventures and they listened with great interest.

'We've not heard such intriguing tales for a long time,' said the old gypsy, when their guest finished. 'We're very delighted you happened to come just to us.'

'Please stay to supper with us,' begged the old woman. 'After all, we have plenty of food. If you wish, you can stay till the morning. I'll make up a bed for you in the little room.'

Kalo Dant was glad to be able to stay.

The old people went to bed early in the next room and soon fell asleep. But however hard he tried, their guest was unable to drop off. The problem would give him no peace. The hours passed and suddenly from the neighbouring church tower he heard the clock strike twelve.

Midnight, thought Kalo Dant to himself, it's high time I slept. But at that moment he thought he heard something moving in the next room. He listened for a moment with

bated breath — and the sound was repeated. He rose very cautiously and opened the door into the other room. The moon was shining in through the open window, and in its light Kalo Dant could see the black hen perched on the sill. It flew in. The moment it touched the ground, it shook itself, and in its place stood that beautiful young gypsy girl. She moved about efficiently and quietly tidied the room. Kalo Dant watched her through the crack in the doorway and didn't dare breathe.

The girl cleared the table, swept the room and suddenly, from out of the blue, breakfast was laid for three on the table.

The clock struck again. The girl stooped over something black lying on the floor. It was the chicken skin. The moment she touched it she disappeared. In her place was the black hen. It flapped its wings, flew out of the window and was gone.

'So that's how it is,' said Kalo Dant to himself. He closed the door and went back to bed, falling asleep almost at once.

The next morning, when Kalo Dant took leave of his hosts, he said, 'What about selling me that black hen of yours? I'd pay you well for it.'

The gypsy woman shook her head. 'I can't, my son, it's not even ours. Supposing someone were to come and claim it after all?'

'I'm sure no one will claim it,' assured Kalo Dant. 'Sell it to me. I'll give you — ten ducats.'

'Good gracious me,' cried the gypsy woman in amazement, but her eyes shone with a greedy look. 'Ten ducats for a hen? Whoever heard of such a thing? And one that doesn't even lay into the bargain . . . !'

'But I like it,' insisted Kalo Dant. 'I want to take it on my travels, so I won't be lonely and sad.' He pulled out a purse full of coins and put ten golden ducats on the table.

The gypsy woman brought in the hen and thanked him profusely for so much money. Kalo Dant placed the hen in front of him on his horse and rode home.

'Well, where's your bride?' said his mother in welcome, and she frowned when she saw he had come alone.

'For the time being I've only got this hen,' laughed Kalo Dant.

'A hen? Well, at least that's something,' grumbled his mother. 'I'll cook it for you for supper.'

'Not on your life,' cried Kalo Dant. Don't you dare touch this hen! I want to keep it in my room.'

He carried the chicken to his room and immediately began plaiting a hen-coop for it out of willow switches. His mother grumbled that he was mad, but he took no notice of her.

'What do you want for supper?' she asked.

'Don't bother to cook, it's not necessary,' said Kalo Dant, and he went on plaiting the hen-coop.

When it was finished, he lay down, but didn't sleep. Just before midnight he got up and went out of the cottage. But he only went round it and peeped in through a crack to see what would happen inside. And it was just as he had expected.

On the stroke of midnight the black chicken crawled out of the coop, shook itself and in an instant was transformed into a beautiful gypsy girl. She laid cloths on the floor, and suddenly, out of the blue, food appeared on the cloths. Kalo Dant walked round the cottage on tiptoe and quietly entered the room. He drew near to the girl from behind and put his arms firmly round her. She twisted in his grip, but it was of no avail. Kalo Dant turned her towards him and kissed her on the mouth. Whereupon she stopped trying to get away and after a moment said:

'My time is almost up, dear one. You must leave me and let me change back into the form of a hen again.'

'I am not going to leave you,' said Kalo Dant. 'You must marry me.'

'If you don't leave me before the clock strikes one,' she told him sorrowfully, 'I shall die. An evil magician transformed me into a hen, because I refused to be his wife. Only twice in twenty-four hours — and always at twelve o'clock — am I allowed to change back into my human form, but only for one hour.'

'But surely there must be some way of ridding you of this curse,' cried Kalo Dant. 'Tell me what I must do to release you.'

'I can only be released by someone marrying me in my chicken disguise,' sighed the girl. 'There's no such man. Who would be prepared to stand up to the ridicule of leading a chicken to the altar?'

'I would,' said Kalo Dant. 'I don't care a couple of peas for people's ridicule. What's your name?'

'I am Tindir Sibillona, the daughter of the King of the Gypsies. Perhaps you've already heard of me?'

'About a year ago,' said Kalo Dant, 'the story was that you had suddenly disappeared.'

'And I also heard about you,' whispered Tindir. 'You are Kalo Dant, the only man ever to have reached the Seventh World, who later tamed a dragon with a feather. Do you really want to release me?'

'I certainly do,' replied Kalo Dant earnestly.

Tindir Sibillona blushed for joy, but then she suddenly stooped down, seized the chicken skin lying on the ground — and in her place was the black hen. At that moment the clock in the nearby church tower struck one.

The next morning, when Kalo Dant awoke, he fed the chicken and ate the food

which Tindir Sibillona had brought the previous night; then he placed the hen on his shoulder and went to find his mother.

'I am going to town to get married,' he told her.

His mother clasped her hands and asked, 'Whom are you going to marry?'

'You'll see,' smiled Kalo Dant, starting to leave.

'At least wait a moment and I'll cook you some breakfast,' his mother called after him. But Kalo Dant just set off.

'I've had breakfast already. If you're hungry, there's still plenty of food in my room.' He untied his horse, swung into the saddle, placed the hen in front of him, and rode to town. He stopped at the vicarage and went in to see the priest.

'Here's a gold ducat,' he said. 'Will you perform a marriage ceremony for me, sir?'

The priest took the ducat, bit into it to see if it was genuine and to make sure he was not being cheated by the gypsy. Then he said, 'Well, why not? Why shouldn't I marry you? Where is your bride?'

'My bride is this hen here,' said Kalo Dant showing him the hen.

'You want to marry a hen?' asked the priest in surprise. 'It seems to me you're not quite right in the head, my lad.'

'If you don't want to, then give me back my ducat!' said Kalo Dant, stretching out his hand. But the priest quickly shoved the money into his pocket and said, 'It's not possible all that fast. First you have to publish the banns.'

'How long will that take?' asked Kalo Dant.

'Three days,' replied the priest. 'What's your name and what is the name of your bride?'

'My name is Kalo Dant and my bride is called Tindir Sibillona. Pronounce the banns today from the pulpit and in three days' time we'll come for the wedding,' said Kalo Dant, and he rode home.

When he arrived, his mother bombarded him with questions: 'Who is your bride? And where did the food come from in the bedroom?' But Kalo Dant just mumbled something and begged her to leave him alone.

That evening he went to bed early. But his mother in the next room couldn't sleep for curiosity. Just before midnight she had the feeling that something was happening in her son's room. She got up quietly and pushed the door ajar. At that moment the church clock sounded the hour—the hour of midnight. Kalo Dant's mother saw how the black hen ran out of the hen-coop, shook itself and changed into a beautiful young girl, how Kalo Dant took her in his arms and whispered something, how the girl laid the cloths on the floor and the food appeared. And when they had both eaten, the girl said, 'It's time, Kalo Dant, I must change back into a hen.'

'But in three days we shall not have to part from one another any more,' answered the young gypsy. The girl slipped from his embrace and stooped to the ground. In that instant she disappeared, and in her place was the black hen.

The mother didn't know if she was awake or dreaming. The following day she kept running round her son as though on pins and needles. She was afraid to reveal what she had seen that night, but finally could resist no longer:

'What's the name of your bride, son, and who is it?' she asked.

'Tindir Sibillona, the daughter of the gypsy king,' he replied briefly.

'And when will she be arriving? We must prepare a banquet.'

'Don't you worry about that,' said Kalo Dant, 'everything will be just as it should be.' And he went out.

But that evening a gypsy came to the camp and said he had heard in the town that a certain crazy chap from this camp was apparently wanting to marry — guess what — a chicken! The previous day he had been at the vicarage, carrying his 'bride' under his arm and asking the priest there to perform the wedding ceremony.

Everyone laughed a lot, but Kalo Dant frowned and went off to his cottage. His mother left too and wept for shame.

The following day everyone knew that the crazy chap who wanted to marry a hen was Kalo Dant. His poor mother didn't dare emerge from her home for shame, but the bridegroom paid no heed of the ridicule. He walked about the camp as though nothing was up and held his head proudly. At last his mother came to him all weepy and in tears and begged him:

'Is it true, Kalo Dant, what people say — that you want to marry a hen?'

'Yes, it is,' he admitted.

'My son, I know you are not crazy,' said his mother unhappily, 'but people don't know that, and they will laugh at you. Are you really going to go to the altar with this chicken?'

'Yes,' he said, and he turned on his heel and left her.

That evening his mother made up her mind that she would prevent the shame of seeing her son lead a hen to the altar. As midnight approached, again she got up silently, carefully pushed the door of her son's room ajar and looked in.

As midnight struck, the black hen climbed from the hen-coop and changed into a gypsy girl. Kalo Dant's mother still had good eyes and she knew that on the ground quite close to the door lay something black. It was the hen's skin with its feathers. While the two were embracing, the mother stretched her arm through the crack of the open door, seized the skin and ran outside.

She raced to the bonfire in the centre of the camp, the remains of which were still

smouldering. Quickly she gathered some dry twigs, and threw them on the smouldering ashes. The fire blazed up. The moment there were flames, the mother threw the chicken skin on to the fire and the feathers began to burn and smell. At that moment Tindir Sibillona in Kalo Dant's embrace cried out in pain.

'What has happened?' asked Kalo Dant, surprised.

'It's burning! Oh, how it burns!' wailed Tindir, and her whole body trembled.

'Where is my chicken skin?' she suddenly called desperately. Kalo Dant looked at the floor, where the skin had lain a few moments earlier, but it was not there.

'Someone has stolen it and thrown it on the fire,' wailed Tindir in pain. 'I can feel how it's burning. If it burns, I shall die . . .' She fell to the ground and writhed in pain.

Kalo Dant ran from the cottage like a madman. He at once saw the glow of the camp-fire, which was supposed to be extinguished at night, and raced to it. There in the light of the fire he recognised his mother. He saw how she was trying to push the chicken skin further on to the fire with a stick.

'What are you doing?' he shouted. Barefoot he plunged into the flames and tried to stamp them out. He seized the skin, which had only burned a bit, and ran with it back to the cottage.

'Here's your skin,' he called.

Tindir jumped up, seized the skin and in an instant had changed back into a hen. Clucking plaintively, it crept back into the coop. A few minutes later the tower clock struck one.

The next day Kalo Dant had not a word to say to his mother. He was furious with her and walked past her as though she didn't exist. He didn't let the hen out of his eyes for an instant, carrying it with him on his shoulder wherever he went. At noon, when she could change back into the form of a girl, he locked himself in his room and there he dined with Tindir and asked her how she felt.

'It's not too bad,' she replied. 'Only the left side of my body is burnt.' She lifted her left arm and there he saw three round, red stripes above the wrist, as though someone had clasped three red-hot bracelets on her arm. She had the same marks on the left leg near the calf.

'Don't worry about that,' he cheered her, 'it looks as though you have had bracelets there. When you are my wife, I'll buy you six bracelets of pure gold and you can cover these marks with them.'

Tindir thanked him, but begged him to take special care of her until the wedding, so that nothing worse could happen to her.

But Kalo Dant's mother didn't dare try to take the chicken skin a second time.

She cried and moaned all day long, and felt sorry for herself that Kalo Dant wouldn't speak to her.

Finally the three days were up. Kalo Dant took the hen-coop, placed it in front of him on his horse and rode to town. Half the gypsy camp rode or ran behind him. No one wanted to miss the spectacle of Kalo Dant being married to a hen. Only his mother remained alone at home. She locked herself in her cottage and wept for shame.

Before the bridegroom had had time to settle the wedding formalities with the priest, the church was full of gypsies and other folk who wished to be witnesses of the lark. At first the priest refused to perform the ceremony. But when Kalo Dant pulled out another ducat from his pocket, he decided to himself that it's hard to come to terms with a madman and the best thing to do is to humour him. He took his most battered chasuble and went to the church.

Kalo Dant stepped up to the altar, took the hen out of the coop and placed it beside him. When the priest gruffly asked him whether he would take Tindir Sibillona gladly

and of his own free will to be his wife, and whether he would live with her forever, he answered loudly 'Yes!' People behind him broke out laughing. The priest rebuked them with a stern glance, and when he turned back to look at this strange bride he was amazed. The moment the bridegroom had blurted out his 'Yes', there was no longer a black hen standing on the steps before the altar, but a beautiful young bride. She was wearing splendid wedding attire, and when the priest, after pulling himself together, asked her whether she would take Kalo Dant to be her one and only wedded husband, she also answered 'Yes!' Whereupon the priest bound their hands with a stole and blessed their marriage bond.

Kalo Dant kissed his bride and gave her his arm, but Tindir whispered to him to take the coop, which was lying on the altar step, so he picked it up, too. They had hardly emerged from the church when another miracle took place before the eyes of the astonished onlookers.

Tindir took the coop, threw it to the ground — and in that instant a splendid regal carriage stood before the gates of the church. Kalo Dant harnessed his own black horse to it, seated his wife in the carriage, sprang up on the box himself and off they drove, the gypsies running behind them with great shouts and cries of congratulation.

Kalo Dant came to a halt in front of his own home and knocked on the door. 'Open up, Mother!' he called. 'I've brought home my wife.'

Kalo Dant's mother first took a peep from the window, and when she saw the splendid carriage and in it not a chicken but a beautiful young bride, she cried out in delight and ran to open the door.

In less than no time they held a gypsy wedding. It was one of the most splendid weddings that had ever taken place, and gypsies came to it from all over the world. Even the King of the Gypsies, Tindir's father, appeared and thanked Kalo Dant sincerely for liberating his daughter from the spell. He gave her a valuable dowry, and Kalo Dant and Tindir Sibillona lived happily ever after.

The Werewolf Princess

Once, there was a certain rich and powerful king who had only one daughter; she was remarkably beautiful, but rather strange. She didn't speak much, and she wandered about the house as though she were dreaming or sleep-walking. The older she grew, the more she slept, until one fine day they just couldn't wake her. In vain they shook her and promised her the stars in the heavens — but she just slept and went on sleeping. She couldn't have been dead, anyone could see that who looked at her, for she always had nice pink cheeks and was breathing ever so gently.

The king summoned the most famous doctors from his whole kingdom. They conferred about her, they prescribed all kinds of medicinal concoctions, but all in vain — the sleeping princess just wouldn't wake up.

One fine day an old gypsy woman found her way to the castle and begged at the gate for some food and old clothing. The gatekeeper's wife was a good-hearted woman and gave her what she asked for. The gypsy woman thanked her and before leaving said, 'I hear you have a princess in the castle who just sleeps, and no one can wake her. If I had a daughter and anything like that happened to her, I would know what to do about it.'

'What would you do?' asked the gatekeeper's wife.

'I would go and see Shtarya Khengero,' replied the gypsy woman, 'and ask him what to do.'

'And who is Shtarya Khengero?' inquired the surprised gatekeeper's wife. 'I've never heard of anyone with a name like that before.'

'Shtarya Khengero isn't a person but an animal,' explained the gypsy woman. 'He lives right in the depths of the forest and is not at all easy to find. He has four eyes, two in the front and two at the back; that's why we gypsies call him Shtarya Khengero, whereas you would know him as Four-eyes. He never sleeps, and he knows everything. But he's a terrible glutton. If the king would give me two nice fat rams, two cocks, six score eggs and two clods of butter, I would try to find Four-eyes and ask him what's wrong with the princess.'

The gatekeeper's wife asked the gypsy woman to wait, while she went to see the king to tell him what had occurred. The king said, 'Very well, give her what she asks for, and tell her that she'll get twice as much if she finds the creature and brings back good advice.'

The gypsy woman took the two rams, the two cocks, the six score eggs and the two clods of butter; half she carried home for herself and the other half she took and went off to look for Four-eyes. And find him she did, because gypsies know their way about the forests better than other people. She placed the gifts in front of him and asked him for advice as to what to do with the sleeping princess.

Four-eyes looked at the ram, the cock, the three score eggs and the clod of butter and said, 'All right, I'll advise you — why shouldn't I? But first, tell me what you've done with the other half of the things the king gave you for me?'

'I know you guess everything,' said the gypsy woman contritely. 'I didn't want to cheat you, but I have children at home, and they are just as hungry as you. I'll bring you what the king gave me, if you'll tell us what to do with the princess.'

'All right,' said Four-eyes, 'but remember this — if you don't do as you promise, I shall never give any good advice again. The princess is a werewolf. She needs human flesh and blood. If she doesn't get them, she'll be bound to die. And it would be better for her and for everyone else if that would happen. But if the king wishes, come what may, to keep her alive, let him have her put in a coffin placed in the castle chapel and see he sends one soldier from his guard to keep watch over her each night. By the morning the soldier will be dead, but the princess will live, and will continue to live as long as the king goes on giving her this food.'

The gypsy woman thanked Four-eyes and hurried back to the castle, where she told the whole story. The king was very distressed, but in the end he said, 'It is better that the soldiers should die rather than one of my own flesh and blood . . .' and he had a splendid coffin made at once. The princess was put in it and the coffin was placed in the castle chapel.

Then the king summoned the soldiers of his bodyguard — there were just a hundred of them — and he ordered that one of them should volunteer to guard the princess at night. As a reward he would receive a regal supper and be given leave the next day, so that he could travel home. Naturally they all volunteered to keep guard. But the king chose the one he liked least. All the others envied this man, but only till the following morning. When the soldiers came to the chapel to take over from their comrade, they found him dead. Nowhere was there any trace of blood. It all seemed very strange.

That evening none of the soldiers volunteered for the night watch. The king had to choose one himself, and the poor chap who was chosen had to obey.

When they found him dead the following morning, the king couldn't force anyone to take the third night watch. He ordered the soldiers to draw lots: whoever drew the unlucky number would have to go, or he would lose his head. The lot fell to a soldier who had already served seven years and was very soon due to go home. He was a gypsy,

and at home there were four children waiting for him. They had enlisted him because he looked so handsome and was of fine build, and they had quite neglected the fact that he had a wife and children. The king's recruiting officers took no notice of little things like that.

But there it was. The gypsy had served his seven years in good faith and now was slowly crossing off the days to the day when he would go home, and suddenly — disaster! It would fall to him to have to go and watch over the princess! He wept, and begged them to send someone instead of him. He complained that it was almost time for him to leave the service, but of course there was no one else prepared to sacrifice himself.

That evening he received a regal supper, but he lost all appetite the moment he remembered that by the morning he might be dead, like his predecessors. However, as he only had to go on guard at sundown and it was still light outside, he wandered about the castle courtyard and mournfully considered his fate. Suddenly he came face to face with an old gypsy woman, the same one who had brought the news to the king that his daughter was a werewolf. That evening she had come to the castle again to fetch her reward, which she had not been able to take away all at one time.

'Good evening, grandma,' the soldier greeted her in a mournful voice.

'Good evening, son,' replied the gypsy woman, when she realised that this young soldier was a gypsy too. 'Why so sorrowful? One of your family died or something?'

'None of us has died yet, but I'll probably be dead by the morning,' sighed the soldier.

'You don't exactly look as though you might die tomorrow,' laughed the gypsy. 'With health like yours, young lad, you should live to be a hundred.'

Whereupon the gypsy told her that he had to go to the chapel that night and guard the princess and then he told her what had happened to the others who had guarded the princess before. The gypsy woman at once knew the whole story, and she felt very sorry for the young man.

'What time do you go on duty?' she asked.

'At sundown,' replied the soldier.

'Well, there's time yet,' she said. 'Make your way to the chapel. Nothing bad will happen to you. Wait for me there! Just before midnight I will come to you and advise you what to do to avoid death.'

The soldier cheered up a bit, thanked her and went off.

The gypsy woman, however, hurried home. From the king's reward she again took one ram, one cock, three score eggs and a clod of butter and hurried off to Four-eyes.

'Here you are, this is what I promised you,' she told him, 'but you'll still have to advise me on one more thing — that is, how to save from death the soldier who is to guard the werewolf princess tonight. He's a good friend of mine, a very nice fellow.'

'That's simple,' replied Four-eyes. 'Just before midnight strikes, he should hide behind the altar. At midnight the princess will wake, but if she sees no one, she'll lie back and fall asleep again. Then your friend can climb out and cheerfully wait for the morning.'

The gypsy woman thanked him and hurried back to the chapel. It was not quite midnight when she arrived. She knocked on the window and the soldier opened it. 'Well?' he asked impatiently.

The gypsy woman told him what Four-eyes had advised and where to hide and then she ran home. The clock was about to strike. The gypsy climbed in behind the altar and waited. The moment the clock finished striking, the lid of the coffin lifted, the princess sat up and looked round, but saw nothing.

'Where's my supper tonight?' she asked angrily. 'Father has probably forgotten me!' Angrily, she pulled the lid down again and disappeared into the coffin.

The gypsy behind the altar waited a while, but as all was quiet, he climbed out, stretched out on the carpet in front of the altar and calmly fell asleep. When the others came in the morning to open the chapel, they found him alive and well.

They ran and told the king, and he was quite amazed. He had the soldier summoned. 'Tell me, what happened during the night?' he said. 'If you tell me the truth, you'll receive a satchel of gold ducats.'

Now this gypsy was not exactly one of the brightest, and he told the king just what had occurred, except that he didn't explain that it had been the gypsy woman who had advised him to hide behind the altar. He even boasted to the king that he had thought of it himself.

The king gave him the promised satchel, but ordered that he should go on duty the coming night once again. The gypsy was very taken aback.

'I'm just finishing my services in a few days,' he said, 'and I was hoping you would let me off as I stood guard so well, and that you'd let me go straight home.'

'No,' said the king, 'you must still guard her this one more night.' Then he made his way to the chapel himself, lifted the lid of the coffin, wrote a few words on a slip of paper and pinned it on the sleeping princess's breast. On it was written: 'I haven't forgotten you. Next time look behind the altar and you will find something!'

The gypsy was terribly miserable that he had to go on guard again, but as he didn't know what the king had done, he was not quite so afraid as he had been the first time. Mostly, he was very annoyed that he couldn't go home yet. That afternoon he was given time to have a good sleep, but instead of doing so, he wandered around outside the castle, and again he met the gypsy woman.

'I see everything turned out all right,' she said, in return for his greeting. 'When will you be going home?'

'Perhaps tomorrow,' answered the soldier. 'The king has ordered me to watch for one more night.'

'I don't like the sound of that,' muttered the gypsy woman. 'You didn't, by chance, tell the king what happened in the chapel during the night?'

'Yes, he asked me, so I told him,' admitted the soldier.

'Oh, you fool!' cried the woman. 'Why did you tell him?'

'He gave me lots of money . . .'

'Well, give me half of it,' said the gypsy woman, 'and once more I'll advise you how to save yourself.' The gypsy gave her half of his reward, and she said:

'Go to the chapel and wait there for me!'

The woman took a ram, a cock, three score eggs and the clod of butter and ran to Four-eyes: 'Please advise me how my friend can be saved again tonight,' she entreated. 'He's a fool — he told the king everything and tonight he has to go on guard again. I'm afraid that it's a trap set by the king.'

'You're right,' nodded Four-eyes. 'The king wishes to get rid of him. But if you tell your friend to hide in the sacristy just before midnight, nothing will happen to him.'

The woman thanked Four-eyes and ran to the chapel. She told the soldier how he should hide, so that he wouldn't be found. 'Let's hope all will be well,' she added, 'and don't let yourself be persuaded to betray everything to the king again in the morning.'

The gypsy promised that he would do as he was bid and that he would definitely hold his tongue. Just before midnight he hid in the sacristy and peeped through a crack . . . Precisely on the stroke of twelve the lid of the coffin flew open. The princess sat up and looked round. When she saw no one, she burst out complaining that her father had forgotten her again. But at that moment she noticed the slip of paper on her breast. No sooner had she read it, than she jumped out of the coffin — and ran straight to the altar. The gypsy shivered in his new hide-out, but the princess, when she didn't find him behind the altar, just got back into the coffin and slammed the lid down over herself angrily. The soldier waited cheerfully till morning.

When they told the king that they had found him alive and well a second time, he had the soldier summoned again, and once more asked him what had happened in the chapel that night. This time the gypsy stubbornly remained silent. The king promised everything imaginable, if only he would tell him what he had seen during the night, but the soldier seemed to be deaf and dumb. Finally the king said, 'I'll give you a sack full of ducats if you'll tell me about it.'

'A sack full of ducats!' thought the gypsy to himself. 'From that I could build myself a splendid house. My children could go to school and be important people.' He pondered

a moment. Then it occurred to him that if the gypsy woman had given him good advice twice over, surely she could do so a third time. There would be money and to spare to pay her for her pains. So he told the king what had happened during the night. The king had the sack of ducats brought at once, but told the soldier that he must go on guard just one more night. 'Tonight will really be the last,' promised the king. 'If you outlive tonight, you can go straight home and live well for ever after.'

The moment the soldier had left, the king went off to the chapel and placed a little note in the coffin for his daughter with the message that he had not forgotten her, that there certainly was a soldier in the chapel. She must merely search it well and not stop till she found him. Thereby, he thought to himself, he would save a sack of ducats and provide the princess with her food.

The gypsy didn't feel exactly happy about the idea of a third night watch. He hid

the sack of ducats in a safe place, but fear of the coming night spoiled all the fun of having such a splendid treasure. If the gypsy woman didn't give him some good advice about where to hide during the night, his riches would be of little avail to him. About noon he set off for the village to find the old woman. And to put her in a good mood he stuffed his pockets full with ducats.

When he admitted that he had told the king everything a second time, however, the gypsy woman was terribly annoyed:

'If you're as stupid as all that, you'd better not come to me for more advice.' But when she saw the pile of glittering ducats lying on the table, her heart softened and she promised she would advise him just once more, but that this would certainly be the last time. In the evening she would come to the chapel and tell him where to hide.

The moment the soldier left, the gypsy woman wrapped some gifts in her kerchief for Four-eyes and hastened to the forest.

'You here again?' grumbled Four-eyes, when he saw her. 'What do you want now?'

First the gypsy woman tipped out her presents. Then she made her request. Four-eyes scratched himself behind the ear with his paw. 'This time it's going to be pretty hard,' he said. 'Today the princess will be so hungry, she'll scour the whole chapel to find your friend. If she doesn't get human flesh and blood tonight, she will die. There's only one way the soldier can pass unnoticed. Just before midnight he should hide behind the coffin at the end where the princess has her head. The moment the werewolf gets up, he must jump into the coffin and pretend to be dead. So long as he doesn't open his eyes or move, the werewolf will not hurt him. But beware if he does either the one or the other. He'll be torn to shreds.'

The gypsy woman thanked Four-eyes and hastened back to the chapel. The soldier was there already. She told him exactly what he had to do, and the gypsy thanked her heartily and promised he would obey her every word.

And truly he did. Just before midnight he went to the head of the coffin. As the clock struck midnight the lid fell to the ground and the soldier hastily covered himself with it. The princess read the note, then jumped up and hurriedly set to searching the whole chapel. She ran from pillar to post; she searched behind the altar, and finding nothing there, ran to the sacristy, climbed up into the pulpit and even up into the choir stalls. Meanwhile, as she was searching some corner or other, the gypsy soldier quietly crept into the coffin, crossed his hands and closed his eyes.

Finally, moaning loudly, the princess returned to the coffin. And when she found the person she was looking for lying there like a corpse, she complained even more. She wept and begged the soldier to open his eyes and get up. But he didn't bat an eyelid.

'Just take one look at me, soldier!' enticed the princess in her most enchanting voice.

'Just look at me, and see how beautiful I am! If you get up, you'll save my life and I'll make you a good wife.'

But even though he was intrigued to see whether the princess was all that beautiful, the gypsy didn't open his eyes once and he didn't move a finger.

Suddenly the clock in the tower struck. It was striking the hour after midnight. The princess let out a piercing shriek and fell to the ground.

The soldier waited a moment. But all was quiet and nothing was happening, so he crept out of the coffin. He looked at the princess and saw she no longer stirred. He lifted her up, put her back in the coffin and closed the lid. He knew that now she would no longer harm him, so he stretched out on the carpet in front of the altar and fell asleep in an instant.

Next morning when the soldiers opened the chapel and found the gypsy still alive, they ran to tell the king. But the guard didn't wait for the king to summon him this time. He ran out of the chapel as fast as a hare, went straight to the place where he had hidden his treasure, pulled out the sack of ducats, threw it over his arm and hastened away. On the way he stopped at the old gypsy woman's house and richly repaid her for having advised him so well. Then he took his leave, bought himself a horse to make the journey faster, and gaily travelled home to see his wife and children, whom he had not seen for seven long years.

The Cunning Gypsy

Once there were two kings who couldn't come to terms and, as so often happens in such cases, the more powerful of the two challenged his adversary to a battle. The subjects of the two countries would fight each other and, according to which side won, that king would be in the right. Naturally, the weaker ruler had no desire to go to war, not because he was sorry for his poor soldiers, but because his adversary had more of them and would be more likely to win. So he sent the following message to the more powerful king:

'Why should our subjects kill one another? Couldn't we settle our dispute without bloodshed? Why should we condemn our subjects to death unnecessarily? Let's set them some sort of task. Whichever of our peoples proves the most efficient will be the victor.'

The powerful king liked the suggestion. Whenever he waged a war, he always lost many people, whom he could ill afford to lose. Trades and crafts ceased to function and for a time afterwards there would be hunger and poverty in the land. He knew that his people were deft with their hands and very clever, and the king appreciated clever people. That was why he had, at the castle, a Jezibaba. A Jezibaba is a gypsy wise-woman who has superhuman powers, and this particular Jezibaba was the most cunning and clever in the land. She was the king's personal advisor. He summoned her and said, 'Please advise me how to defeat our royal neighbour without going to war. Think of some sort of task for our people which our neighbour's subjects would not be capable of. If my subjects can do better than his, we shall defeat him without a fight.'

The Jezibaba considered a moment and then said, 'You have many gypsies in your country, royal sir. Gypsies make good blacksmiths. Order them to make an iron chariot, which will not only be strong, but also swift and will move easily. Let your neighbour give his people the same task. Then hold a race. Whichever chariot reaches the winning-post first and stands up to the great collision that will follow will be the winner.'

The king liked the idea. He rewarded the Jezibaba and sent a message to his neighbour, asking him to make this special kind of chariot. Then he summoned all his blacksmiths and told them that if one of them could forge an iron chariot that was as strong as a rock, but at the same time was swift and very mobile, he would be well rewarded.

The neighbouring king gave his blacksmiths the same task. And among those blacksmiths there was one who had a gypsy apprentice. The lad had been a foundling and had

no name. And he hadn't needed one, because the blacksmith who had brought him up from a very early age had never called him anything but 'You gypsy'. However, the boy had deft hands and was very clever, though he had no idea how to read or write. Very early on the blacksmith began entrusting him with the hardest tasks, and by the time the apprentice was eighteen years old, he knew more than his master. Yet he never received a thing for his labour. In fact the blacksmith didn't even want to give him his apprenticeship papers, he was afraid that as a member of the guild he would cost him a lot, or that the gypsy might simply leave him.

When the blacksmith heard of the king's command, he ordered his wife to cook a cauldron full of thick, tasty soup in which there were whole chunks of meat. Then he summoned the apprentice and said, 'You may eat all this soup yourself, if you can forge an iron chariot that will be as strong as a rock, but at the same time swift and highly mobile. Do you think you can do it?'

'Why not?' replied the gypsy. And on the spot he ate all the soup and even asked the

blacksmith for bread, with which he wiped the bottom of the cauldron so thoroughly that there was no need to wash it.

'Master, if you'd give me proper food each day,' said the gypsy, 'you've no idea the things I would be capable of.'

'Well, now you'll eat like this every day, and into the bargain I'll buy you new clothes and shoes,' promised the blacksmith.

'What do you want the chariot for?' asked the apprentice.

'It will be your testing piece, so that then I can give you your apprentice papers,' replied the master blacksmith. The gypsy was delighted at the thought and set to work with a will. At noon and at supper he ate like a wolf, but in between he forged and forged till the sparks flew. He sang or whistled as he worked, and his work was a delight to see.

Finally the chariot was finished. When the master examined it, he saw that it was something that was not likely to be equalled by any other. The frame was forged of one thin piece of iron and there was not a crack or a bubble in it. The long shaft, to which one could harness twelve horses, was firm and pliable and the iron wheels turned as smoothly on their axle-trees as the arms of a windmill.

The blacksmith harnessed his skinny mare to the shaft — she pulled it quite easily — and drove the chariot to the city to show the king. Some other blacksmiths had also brought chariots, but none of them were as firm and moved as easily as the gypsy apprentice's one. The king paid the blacksmith a great deal of money for it, and the man bought a lot of fine things in the town for himself and his wife. But the shoes and clothing he had promised the apprentice he bought from a second-hand clothes dealer. When the gypsy lad saw them, however, he was delighted, for the clothes he was wearing were already in rags, and he had never had shoes in his life. He thanked the master profusely and then asked him for his apprentice papers. 'Why the hurry?' frowned the blacksmith. 'Aren't you happy here?'

'I don't want to leave,' replied the apprentice, 'but you promised me you would write out my apprenticeship papers if I forged that chariot you sold in the city.'

'Who said I wouldn't write them?' retorted the master craftsman. 'But I don't think there's all that hurry and you can wait a day or two till I have time.' And he turned on his heel and went off.

The gypsy just sighed and got on with his work. Shortly afterwards, a stranger came into the forge and asked him to shoe his horse for him. While the apprentice was busy forging, the stranger told him the latest news from the town.

'My lad, your master isn't half a clever fellow. He forged an iron chariot for our king which people travel to look at from far and wide. Why, with that chariot we may even win the war, so a lot depends on it.'

'What war?' asked the apprentice, puzzled. He never stirred from the forge and he always had so much work, that he hadn't the faintest idea what was going on in the world. So the stranger then told him about the agreement between the two kings and he learned that the king himself had bought his chariot, because it had been the best of the lot. The stranger also told him that the king intended to harness his twelve best white horses to it, and that there would be a race with them. The race would take place on the borders of the two countries. The two royal chariots would start for the frontier at equal distances away from the border. Whichever chariot reached the goal first, would be recognised as the faster. And at the border the two chariots were to have a collision. Whichever withstood the collision best, with least damage, would be recognised as the stronger. If one of the chariots won both competitions, its owner would be declared the victor of the quarrel.

Scarcely had the stranger left, than the gypsy threw off his work overall, dressed in the clothes the master smith had brought him from the town, put on his boots and hastened to the city. Now he knew why his master had made him forge the chariot and why he had been feeding him so well recently. No doubt he had been handsomely rewarded by the king and yet had settled things with his apprentice by buying him some old second-hand clothes. Into the bargain he hadn't even made out his apprenticeship papers yet, which he had been promising him for so many years.

The gypsy went straight to the castle. There, on the great field in front of it, stood crowds of people. All of them were examining the iron chariot, admiring it and praising the workmanship. The gypsy knew at once that it was the chariot he had forged and he pressed in among the crowd around his masterpiece and listened to what the people were saying.

'We're surely going to win the war with this,' said one fellow. 'I've never seen such a fine chariot in my life.'

'And the king's white horses are fine runners too,' added another — it was the king's equerry. 'I bet you anything, that our king's horses will be at the border first with a chariot like this.'

'And how they would run if I were to re-shoe them,' interjected the gypsy.

'Who are you?' asked the king's equerry. 'The apprentice of the blacksmith who forged this chariot,' replied the gypsy. Whereupon everyone pressed in around him and began congratulating him.

'What did the king pay you for the chariot?' asked someone.

'I didn't get a thing,' said the apprentice. 'The master took all the money and only bought me these old boots and clothing . . .'

'Come with me, and I'll take you to the king . . .' said the equerry. He took the gypsy by the arm and led him to the king.

'This fellow maintains that he forged the chariot you bought from his master and that he got nothing for it,' the equerry told the king. The king looked at the gypsy's hands.

'I see you really are a blacksmith,' he said. 'If it is true that your master paid you nothing for your work, I shall see the matter is taken to court.'

'I don't want to go to court,' said the gypsy, 'but I heard that your horses were taking part in a race with this chariot. If you'll permit me to shoe them for you, you'll find they will run like the wind.'

'Very well,' agreed the king. 'Here's a deposit for the work you'll do.' He gave him a purse full of gold coins. The gypsy had never seen so much money in his life before and he said delightedly, 'Since you pay me so royally, Your Majesty, I'll give you a piece of good advice as well. Order the road where your horses will be racing to be covered with an iron carpet. Then your chariot will be sure to be first.'

'That's not a bad idea,' replied the king, 'but the race is to be in a few days. Who could forge such a long iron carpet in such a short time?'

'Order all your blacksmiths to start work at once,' advised the gypsy. 'If they work day and night, they will certainly be ready in time. If you wish, I'll see to it myself that they work swiftly and honestly . . .'

'You seem to be a clever fellow,' said the king approvingly. 'If you wish, you can stay with me and be my advisor.'

So the gypsy remained there. The king at once nominated him his chief advisor and awarded him the Blacksmith's Order, first rank. The former apprentice was now doing fine, but he didn't let up. He diligently shod the king's horses for the race and at the same time kept an eye on the work of making the iron carpet. Blacksmiths from all over the country were working at it day and night. Among them was our gypsy's former master. He worked worst of the lot and slowest, and the inspector, whom the blacksmith didn't recognise as his lost apprentice, gave him a thorough drubbing because of it.

One day, when the king's new advisor went to the stables, he met the king's daughter. She looked at him, and he pleased her. And because she was most inquisitive, she wasted no time in finding out who he was. The gypsy explained and, in return, asked her who she was.

The princess was amazed, 'What, you don't recognise me? I'm the princess. Come and visit me sometime,' she invited him. The gypsy promised he would.

But meanwhile the day was approaching when the race was to take place. At the border of the two countries the two rulers met with their advisors and all their heralds. The kings shook hands coolly, then turned their backs on one another and each gave a sign to the trumpeters. The trumpeters sounded the signal and at that moment the race began. The chariots set off.

The gypsy had asked the king to be allowed to drive the horses which he himself had shod, and the king's white horses were splendid runners indeed. But the enemy king's black ones were no worse. The opponent's chariot was also a good one, and if it hadn't been for the iron carpet, the black horses would have won, as just before the race the cunning Jezibaba had given them oats mixed with herbs, which had driven them wild. Over the uneven ground, however, the wheels of their carriage couldn't turn as easily as over the smooth iron. What's more, the gypsy was an excellent driver. He mastered his six-in-hand splendidly. His fine white horses flew like the wind over the iron carpet.

The Jezibaba, standing at the king's side, was furious with rage when she saw the iron carpet.

She was furious that she had not thought of anything as clever as that. But there was nothing to be done. The black and white horses raced towards one another. It was clear that the white ones would be there first . . . both chariots were thundering towards one another at great speed . . . the white six-in-hand crossed the border line first, but only by the length of a chariot. And there the black horses were, too. At the last moment, just before the two chariots crashed together, the gypsy driver sprang to the ground. The next moment there was a thundering crash, the chariots hurled at one another, hurled apart again and rolled over. When the judges, selected from the two inimical parties, examined them, they discovered that the more powerful king's chariot had a broken shaft and had lost a wheel. On the other hand, the second chariot had hardly been scathed. As it had also been first at the border, it won the race.

Thus the weaker king was the victor. His enemy was furious, but he could not go back on his word, and the victor and the loser both returned to their respective countries. However, the king who had lost was very angry and he threatened the Jezibaba that he would have her whipped for advising him badly.

'Don't be in such a hurry,' said the baba. 'This time it didn't work out well, but I'll think of something else all right.'

Soon afterwards, three messengers arrived at the victorious king's court and each of them carried a branch.

'Our master has sent these three branches to you,' said the messengers, 'and sends a message that you should guess which of them was cut from the tree first, which second and which last. If you don't succeed in guessing, he'll declare war.'

The king was taken aback. The branches appeared exactly alike — how could he possibly guess which had been cut when. He asked the messengers to wait a moment and sent for his advisor.

When the king told him the story, the gypsy laughed and said, 'Why, that's easy. Come into the garden and I'll show you how one finds out.'

There was a goldfish pool in the garden. The king's advisor threw all the three branches into the water. One sank immediately, the second sank slowly to the bottom and the third remained on the surface.

'The one which sank immediately was cut from the tree first,' said the gypsy, 'because we know that dried wood sinks quicker than fresh wood. For this reason, therefore, the one which sank more slowly was cut later, and the last to be cut was the one which is floating.' He pulled out the branches and marked them with a knife. The king returned straightaway to the messengers, gave them the marked branches and sent them back home.

When his enemy saw that his neighbour had guessed the riddle correctly, he was even more enraged. He summoned the Jezibaba, who had advised him, and shouted at her angrily:

'My neighbour is just as clever as you. He has guessed your riddle right away.'

'He didn't get that out of his own head,' said the Jezibaba. 'No king in the world

has enough sense to be able to think out a thing like that. He must have someone to advise him. I'll set him another riddle, a harder one, and we'll see how he manages to think this one out.'

Not long afterwards the messengers visited the neighbouring king again. They led three fine, strong horses up to him and said, 'Our master sends a message that you are to guess which of these horses is the oldest, which the middle one and which the youngest. If you cannot guess, he will declare war on you.'

The horses were identical, and the weaker king was much at a loss. So he asked the messengers to wait and ran to find his advisor.

'That's easy to find out,' laughed the gypsy. He ordered the servants to fetch a handful of oats, a handful of poor corn and a handful of barley. He placed the three piles on the ground and said: 'Now let the horses loose, and let them choose which they like!' One of the horses went straight for the oats, the second chose the inferior corn and the third chewed the barley.

'The horse which chose the oats,' said the king's advisor, 'is the cleverest, and must be the oldest. The one that took the inferior corn is the middle one, and the most stupid was satisfied with barley, and must be the youngest.' He marked the horses and the king sent the messengers home.

When the Jezibaba saw that the neighbour had again guessed the riddle correctly, she was beside herself with rage. When she had calmed down, she said to the king:

'Your enemy must have an advisor who understands horses better than I. It cannot be anyone but a gypsy. I'll go to the king myself and find out who it is that is the brain behind him.'

The Jezibaba dressed up as an old-clothes dealer and set off for the neighbouring king. She offered to tell his fortune. The king gave her his left hand. The baba frowned and said, 'Beware, oh king! You have someone in your close environment who is more clever than you yourself. He'll try and take your life so as to gain the throne. Get rid of him quickly, or you will have great trouble.'

The king was deeply shocked. When the baba had left, he began wondering who the person was who wished to destroy him. It surely could be none other than his gypsy advisor. That was someone who lived in his close environment and was more clever, for he advised him. He immediately ordered that the gypsy be caught and imprisoned in a tower. But since he feared his cunning, the king called masons and ordered them to build a wall round the tower. Thus the prisoner would not be able to escape, however clever he was.

While the masons were building the wall, the princess looked out from her window and asked them what they were doing.

'We're walling in the king's first advisor,' answered the masons.

'Is that the one who forged the chariot with which we won the war?' asked the princess.

'That's him,' affirmed the masons.

'Why does my father want him walled in?' asked the princess.

'The king just ordered it,' explained the mason.

'Why does the king want to destroy the one person who gave him such good advice at moments of difficulty?' said the princess in bewilderment.

'We don't know,' replied the masons, and went on with their work.

'Come here!' said the princess to the man standing nearest to her. When he came up to her, she said, 'If you could see to it that in the wall by the lowest window of the tower there will be one brick loose, that can be pulled out, I'll give you this ring.' She showed him her beautiful ring with its great big jewel. The man promised that he would manage to do as she asked.

Though the masons finished walling in the gypsy, the poor fellow still had no idea why or wherefore. In vain he cudgelled his brains to find out why the king was so angry with him. The advice he had given so far had all been good, hadn't it . . .?

Then it suddenly seemed to him as though he heard a kind of scratching. He looked at the spot where the lowest window of his prison had been walled up — and what did he see? There was a hole in the wall and someone was looking at him in the tower. And he also heard a voice, which he thought he recognised.

'It's me, the princess,' said a gentle, feminine voice. 'I've brought you some food.'

The gypsy was delighted and went straight over to the wall where the brick had been removed. Through the opening the princess handed him a plate with a large portion of roast goose. That was worth having! The gypsy fell to it with great gusto and the princess watched him with satisfaction. When he had finished, she said, 'I had this opening made in the wall. I'll come to you regularly each day and bring you something good.'

'That's very kind of you,' said the prisoner gratefully, 'but tell me, why is the king punishing me so cruelly. I haven't committed any crime, have I?'

'Probably someone spoke disparagingly of you to my father,' said the princess. 'He's rather over-hasty sometimes. I've no idea what he has against you, but I'll try to find out and see if I can dissuade him from it. Until then you'll have to stick it out somehow.'

Meanwhile the Jezibaba had returned home, and she told the king, 'I've seen to it that the person who was advising your neighbour would be disarmed and put out of the way. Now I'll give your enemy a task, which I'm sure he will never solve.'

A short while later the neighbouring king received a visit from twelve completely identical young men. All of them were splendidly attired and one of them said, 'Among

us there is a prince — the king's only son. You must guess which he is. If you fail to do so, our master will declare war on you.'

Oh, how the king would have paid dearly for good advice! How was he to guess which of the twelve was his enemy's son, if he had never seen the prince and if all these twelve fellows looked as like as peas. He begged the messenger for a day in which to consider his answer. The young men agreed and the king asked them to be his guests. Then he went off to find his daughter, to tell her of the misfortune that had befallen them.

The princess listened to him intently and then said, 'This time it really is a difficult task. A pity you had your best advisor incarcerated in the tower, perhaps he would have advised you well again . . .'

'I heard that he was attempting to take my life,' sighed the king.

'Who told you?' asked the princess.

'An old pedlar who read my hand and foretold my death shortly if I did not rid myself of the person in my close environment who was giving me advice.'

'Well, I never,' said the princess. 'That looks almost as though the king who has been giving you all these riddles and threatening us with war needed to rid you of your advisor rather than get rid of you.'

'That never occurred to me,' cried the king. 'I see my daughter is also cleverer than I.'

'Will you have me incarcerated, too?' asked the princess jokingly. 'I'm afraid that if you were to rid yourself of all the people in your close environment who are cleverer than you, you'd find yourself rather lonely at home . . .'

The king was rather taken aback, but after a moment added, 'Perhaps I was rather over-hasty . . . What am I to do now? Have the wall knocked down? The poor fellow will have died of hunger long ago.'

'Perhaps not,' said the princess. 'What about trying?'

So the king had the wall round the tower knocked down. And he was most amazed to find they brought the prisoner out alive, not in the least skinny — in fact, rather the contrary.

'Forgive me,' he told him. 'I'm very sorry I had you incarcerated and I want to recompense you for it, especially if you will advise me on just one more thing.' Then he told him about the twelve young men. The gypsy considered a moment and then said: 'Invite the twelve to supper. In place of your best cutlery, give them each a tin spoon. If they protest, make the excuse that you are poor, that you had to sell your silver in order to have the iron chariot forged. The one who refuses to eat with the tin spoon will be the king's son. But you mustn't let him go back with the others; instead, have him incarcerated in the tower, the way I was.'

'But it's the neighbouring king's only son,' objected the king. 'If I do as you advise, he'll be even more angry and declare war all the same.'

'He has threatened you often enough,' said his advisor. 'There's no harm in your threatening him a bit for a change. Just because the prince is his only son, he will not want his successor to die of hunger in a tower. That's what would happen if he were to declare war, because after all a war takes quite a bit more time than it takes for a man to die of hunger. Send back a message to the king that you'll release the prince the moment he sends you his female advisor in exchange. She is the wicked baba who thought up all the riddles for the king. I am sure it was she who advised you to have me incarcerated.'

'How do you know all this?' asked the king in amazement.

'A little bird flew round the prison window before I was incarcerated and betrayed it all to me . . .' laughed the gypsy. Of course, it had not been a little bird, but the princess, with whom he had thought out the whole affair.

The king carried out the gypsy's advice. He invited the twelve young men to supper and, in place of fine cutlery, gave them each a tin spoon.

'What on earth,' cried the guests disgustedly. 'Are we to eat with spoons? Why don't you give us proper cutlery?'

'Because I have none,' replied the king. 'I grew so poor, and all because of your lord and master, who keeps threatening me with war. I have to maintain a permanent army and it all costs money. So eat with what you've got. I also eat with a spoon and I'm a king.'

The guests grumbled, but when the cook brought in the supper, the food smelled so good, that the young lads couldn't resist it. One by one they picked up their spoons and started eating . . . Only one of them sat there frowning and not eating. He couldn't bear to pick up the spoon, and he didn't touch a morsel. Whereupon the king jumped up and cried out angrily, 'I give you the best I have and you disdain it? You must be the king's son! And I'll have you put in the tower and incarcerated because you have offended me. The rest of you may go, and tell your king what I've said. Tell him, that if he doesn't want his son to die of l unger in the tower, he should straightway send me that old woman who gives him advice. Otherwise, I'll not hand over the prince under any circumstances.'

When the eleven young men gave the neighbouring king the message, he was so angry, that he had the Jezibaba whipped. Then he ordered that she should be tied to a horse and carried off to the other king. In addition, as a gift of reconciliation, he sent him a chariot full of gold and precious stones too. He also sent the message that he would never declare war any more and that he would live in peace and friendship with his neighbour to his dying day, if only his son would be released.

The neighbouring king was delighted with the gift and with the former enemy's message. He released the prince straightaway, gave a banquet in his honour and treated him so nicely that the prince was quite reconciled. When he had had a full explanation, the prince had to admit that his father had not behaved well and that the neighbour was completely in the right. He promised the king that when he ascended the throne he would never declare war on anyone.

The king then had the Jezibaba locked up in the tower, and the wall was rebuilt. Shortly afterwards, the king's gypsy advisor married the princess. When the old king died, the gypsy became his successor.

He ruled wisely. He also lived at peace with his neighbours. He and the young king from the neighbouring land would visit each other and tell one another that their predecessors had acted stupidly when they waged war and ravaged the land. And the people of both countries were satisfied and everything went beautifully, the way it always does in fairy tales.

Mighty Jepas

There was once a gypsy blacksmith who had three sons. The two elder boys were handsome strapping young fellows, but somehow the youngest was not such a success. The whole right side of his body was strangely paralysed. His right leg was lame, his right hand limp and useless, and the right side of his face was twisted as though in a permanent cramp. Seen from the left he looked quite respectable, but when you looked at him from the right, you could see he was a cripple. That is why they called him Jepas-murs, which in gypsy language means something like 'half-a-man'. At home they just called him Jepas.

Little Jepas was rather an unhappy child because of his appearance. From an early age he was always taciturn and preferred to be alone. He had no friends, not even his brothers. No one was particularly fond of him and no one bothered about him much. He ate, he slept and grew up like the other boys of his age, but, strangely enough, he was never ill. Once, when his elder brothers had measles, Jepas, who slept with them in one bed, didn't catch it from them. 'He never catches anything,' said his mother. Except for his strange crippling, he was as sound as a horse.

Now it happened that when the eldest brother was twenty years old, the Gypsy King proclaimed that he wished to marry off his daughter, who was famed far and wide for her beauty. He would give her to the young gypsy lad who proved to be the strongest. He could be as poor as a church mouse, but he must be really strong. The king said he would make each suitor submit to a test, and the one who withstood it would win Elisabeth's hand.

'You know, Father, that would be something for me,' said the eldest of the brothers, when he heard of it. 'I'm young and strong; I'm going to try to win the king's daughter.'

'I don't see exactly why it should be you,' objected the younger brother. 'I'm only a year younger, and yet I'm stronger.'

'That's not true,' retorted the elder one.

'It is!'

'Don't argue!' interrupted their father. 'That will only show which of you can shout loudest. It would be better if you would try to prove which of you is the stronger. Come to my smithy and try to lift the anvil. Whichever of you can lift that and put it on his shoulder, is really and truly a strong man, and can go to ask for the king's daughter.'

The lads willingly went off to the smithy. Jepas, who had been listening, trailed along behind them. He was curious, too, to see which of his elder brothers was the stronger.

The eldest seized the anvil with both hands, raised it a bit, and then quickly dropped it. It was too heavy.

'Why, you can't even pick it up,' cried the younger one scornfully. He went up to the anvil and lifted it, but on trying to put it on his shoulder, he found it far too heavy and dropped it, too.

'Father,' said Jepas timidly, 'could I also try?'

The brothers burst out laughing. 'You want to lift the anvil?' asked the elder one mockingly. 'Why, you've only got one hand.'

'Whatever for?' cried the younger. 'Do you dare to prove you can do more than we can?'

'Let him be,' said the father. 'Everyone has a right to try. Just have a go, Jepas!'

The youngest brother went up to the anvil, seized it with his left hand and lifted it from the ground with the greatest of ease, as though it were a feather. Then, without any great effort, he calmly placed it on his shoulder.

The brothers were struck dumb and the father was amazed. 'My, you're a strong fellow indeed, I'd never have thought it of you. I doubt if there's another man among us as strong as you.'

'Father,' asked Jepas, 'do you think I could try for Princess Elisabeth's hand?'

'You, you indeed,' cried the eldest brother scornfully. 'Even if you did succeed in passing the king's test, Elisabeth wouldn't have you.'

'She would take one look at you and run away,' said the second with assurance. 'Just take a peep in the mirror at your twisted mouth. No woman will ever want to marry you!'

'You can never be sure about that,' answered the father, who was sorry for the youngest boy. 'Off you go together as friends and try your luck! If one of you wins, mind the others don't envy him, but enjoy his success as it behoves the members of one family!'

So the brothers set off on their journey to the King of the Gypsies. Towards evening they reached a mountain shepherd's hut, where an old shepherd was pasturing his flock of sheep. They greeted him politely and begged to be allowed to stay the night in the hut.

'God bless,' replied the shepherd, 'certainly you can sleep the night here. Where are you making for, my lads?'

'We're off to the King of the Gypsies, to ask for the hand of his daughter Elisabeth,' replied the eldest one.

'You must all be very strong then,' smiled the shepherd. 'But you're not the first

who have wanted to marry beautiful Bessie. Several others have passed this way already, and none of them has been successful yet. It doesn't surprise me, because none of them was strong enough to overcome my ram.'

'Which ram?' asked the younger brother.

'I've got a ram in my flock, and it's a thorough devil,' replied the shepherd. 'It's as big as a calf, has black horns which curl several times, and it has the strength of a bull. No man who has struggled with it, has ever yet succeeded in getting it down on to its back. Whoever succeeds in doing this will not be set a harder task by the King of the Gypsies, I'm quite sure.'

'I'd like to try,' said the eldest brother.

'I, too,' added the second hastily.

'Come on, then,' said the shepherd, and he led them to the sheep pens, called the black ram and challenged the brothers to wrestle with it.

The eldest brother was the first to try his luck, but the fight didn't last long. The ram rolled its eyes wildly, charged, hoisted its opponent on to its horns and threw him high into the air. The fellow fell to the ground and lay there as though dead.

The younger brother rushed angrily at the ram, seized its horns and tried to roll it over. But the ram was not to be had so easily. It tugged its head sideways, sprang backwards, then suddenly attacked again — tossing the younger brother in that instant right into the air. When he landed, he also remained there motionless on the ground. Jepas walked up to the bodies of his two brothers.

'Are they dead, grandad?' he asked anxiously.

The shepherd shook his head. 'No, they've only fainted. They'll soon come round again. And what about you, son? Looking at you, I imagine you won't want to fight with my ram, eh? I've never seen anyone look quite as odd as you do. What happened to your face? And to your right arm and leg? Were you kicked by a horse?'

'No, I was born like this,' replied Jepas, 'but it won't stop me from putting that devilish black ram of yours in its place.' Whereupon he charged at it, seized the ram by the horns and flung it to the ground so hard that the animal's legs ploughed deep into the ground. But Jepas picked it up again, threw it into the air and the next moment it was lying there, its four legs waving in the air.

'Well, I've never seen anything like it in my life,' exclaimed the shepherd. 'I bet there's not a stronger man anywhere in the world. I'll eat my hat if you don't win that princess.'

'So long as she'll want me,' sighed Jepas. He paid no more attention to the ram, but picked up the limp bodies of his brothers with his strong left arm and carried them back to the hut.

Slowly the brothers came round from their faintness, but in the morning they still felt too weak to continue on their journey.

'I'll go on alone,' decided Jepas, 'and on the return journey I'll stop and pick you up.' And off he went.

When he arrived at the Gypsy King's home, he announced himself as a suitor for Princess Elisabeth. The King took one look at him and burst out laughing.

'What's this?' he cried. 'A miserable cripple like you? Haven't you heard that I'm only giving my daughter to the strongest of all the gypsies?'

'I'm strong enough,' replied Jepas. 'Even though I may have only one healthy arm and one healthy leg, I can do a lot more than many another.'

'Well, we'll see about that,' added the king, and he led Jepas to a meadow, where there was a windmill.

'This windmill,' he said, 'has not been turning for fifty years. Its blades have rusted at the hinges. If you can manage to make the arms of the windmill turn with one hand

so that it works, I'll give you Bessie's hand.' And he laughed again, because he was sure the cripple couldn't possibly manage it.

Jepas, however, just nodded his head, went up to the mill, seized one of the blades with his healthy arm and loosened it. Then he grasped a second — and the windmill started turning. In an instant it was noisily and gaily rattling away.

The King was most amazed, and at the same time he was afraid. He didn't want to give his daughter in marriage to a cripple. But a promise is a promise, and a king must keep his word. He had Elisabeth summoned, and when she arrived, Jepas happened to be standing so that she saw him only from the left.

'There's the Atlas who has made my windmill turn,' said the King. 'He wants to be your husband, and as I promised it, you will have to marry him.'

Elisabeth looked at the windmill, gaily turning away, then looked at Jepas and smiled. But at that moment Jepas moved and she saw the other, the crippled, half of his face. She shuddered and cried out, 'What's that? You say I've got to marry a cripple like this?' And she started crying and ran away.

'There now,' said the Gypsy King, at a loss, 'she doesn't like the look of you — and honestly I'm not surprised. Do you really want her? A woman who doesn't like her husband, doesn't usually make a good wife, and Elisabeth is no angel.'

Jepas frowned. Was he to give up a princess whom he had earned honestly, just because she didn't like his face? True, it wouldn't be much of a life if she despised him, but Elisabeth was a very lovely girl . . . he would never find a lovelier, and to live without a wife . . . is hard . . . Finally he said, 'Yes, I do, whether she likes it or not. You promised her, and I fully deserve her.'

'Very well,' said the King. 'I'll fulfil my promise. But if she does anything later, don't blame me. I've warned you.'

'I'll watch out,' growled Jepas.

And so the wedding took place. It was splendid and bounteous, and gypsies came to it from far and wide. It lasted a whole week and the guests had plenty to eat and drink the whole while. And when the festivities were over, the King ordered the carriage to be prepared. He took leave of his daughter, pressed a pouch of gold into her hand as a dowry and wished the newly-weds good luck.

Elisabeth was all tears. She huddled up into a corner of the carriage, hid her face in her shawl, and refused to speak. Throughout the festivities she had not said a word to her husband. This had upset Jepas, but if she wouldn't speak, he wouldn't either. He sprang up on the box, seized the reins, whipped up the horses and off they drove.

They journeyed as far as the shepherd's hut, where Jepas's brothers had stayed. But when the two saw their brother driving up in the carriage with his beautiful bride, they

both looked very sour-faced. They envied him. However, they very much approved of Elisabeth, and she liked them, too.

You'd never have thought that these three were real blood brothers, thought Elisabeth, grimly. Two handsome ones and one such a cripple. And it would happen that the cripple has to be my husband.

Jepas was no fool, and he guessed what the three were thinking. He didn't let them suspect anything, however. He asked his brothers to climb into the carriage, and he ordered Bessie to sit up beside him on the box. Silently she obeyed him, and off they rode.

During the journey the brothers at the back began whispering to one another. They were discussing how they could get rid of their youngest brother and win the woman for themselves.

'When we reach the well,' proposed the elder one, 'we'll ask him to stop, saying we're thirsty. We'll send him to draw water, but we'll walk up behind him and push him in. He'll fall into the well and drown. Then I'll take Bessie.'

'And why you, if I may ask?' retorted the younger one. 'I'm the stronger of the two of us and, besides, I have a notion that Bessie keeps glancing at me.'

'She'd better try!' burst out the elder one. 'She's already smiled at me twice. I know she prefers me.'

'No, me!'

They argued until they reached the well. 'Stop a moment, Jepas, will you,' called the elder one, 'and bring us some water; we're terribly thirsty.'

Jepas brought the carriage to a halt and went over to the well. But as he went, he glanced round and saw his brothers coming up behind him. 'Stay in the carriage!' he called out good-naturedly, 'I'll bring the water to you.'

'We'll help you pull up the bucket,' said the brothers.

One of them loosened the chain and the other let the bucket down into the well. 'You pull the water up; you're the strongest,' said the brothers.

But Jepas was suspicious and guessed they had some queer idea up their sleeves. 'But listen, you know I've only got one arm,' he said, 'and it's difficult to pull up a bucket with one arm. Let's all pull together. It will be quicker . . .' They couldn't deny that. So they all pulled the bucket up together. While the brothers had their drink, Jepas didn't let them out of his sight an instant, so they were not able to do what they had intended.

As they walked back to the carriage, the younger brother whispered to the elder one, 'We shan't beat him at it like this. We'll have to wait till nightfall.'

At dusk they drove up to a forest. They decided they would camp the night there

and wait to continue the journey in the morning. Bessie unpacked the food she had brought with her, and they all had a share.

After supper Jepas and Bessie lay down at the foot of a tall oak tree, and the brothers stretched out a short way off. Jepas was soon fast asleep and as soon as the brothers saw their youngest brother was sleeping soundly, they got up quietly and crept up to the carriage. They cut off the horses' girth straps and used them for tying the sleeping Jepas to the trunk of the tree. Bessie woke up and saw it all, but said nothing — she just watched the brothers. They were well aware, however, that she was not asleep. When Jepas had been securely bound, the elder brother said to Bessie, 'I see you're not very sorry for your husband. Probably you're glad to be rid of him, aren't you?'

'Yes, I am,' said Bessie.

'Either of us would be better than that cripple,' added the second brother. 'If you like, you can choose, and marry whichever you like best.'

The idea pleased Bessie. She smiled and said nothing and let them carry on with what they were doing.

Jepas slept soundly and knew nothing of it all. The brothers and Bessie left him lying there and ran to the carriage. They yoked the horses and began arguing who should drive the carriage and who sit inside with Bessie.

'It was my idea to tie him to the tree,' said the younger one, 'so I'll sit behind with Bessie and you can drive the carriage.'

'No,' objected the elder one, 'you can drive!'

'Let Bessie decide,' proposed the younger.

Bessie suggested that she should drive herself. 'Both of you sit behind; I'm a good horsewoman,' she laughed. In fact she insisted, and the brothers — as they wanted to please her — finally agreed to do as she said. They both sat behind, Bessie seized the reins, and off they went.

When the carriage stopped outside the smithy, the gypsy and his wife ran out to see what unusual visitor had come to see them. How delighted they were when they saw it was their sons and that they had with them a beautiful girl. At once they guessed that she was Elisabeth, the daughter of the King of the Gypsies. But of course they couldn't tell which of the sons was her husband.

'Where did you leave Jepas?' asked the father.

'Oh, we lost him somewhere on the way—we don't really know how,' replied the eldest.

'And which of you two is the lucky one who won this beautiful young woman?' asked the mother.

The two brothers looked at each other uncertainly and then looked questioningly at

Bessie. She just smiled and said, 'I don't know yet which I shall choose. They're both handsome and strong.'

'Fair enough,' said the blacksmith. 'Now come into our house. We must celebrate as befits such a moment.'

While they were celebrating the happy return of the two sons and the princess at the smithy, Jepas woke up in the forest. He looked round, and seeing no one, tried to get up. Only then did he notice that he was tied to the tree with straps. He at once realised what had happened. His brothers and his wife had played a fine trick on him! It made him so angry that he sprang up, overturned the enormous oak tree, roots and all. He didn't even try to tear off the straps which tied him to the tree. He simply hastened home, just as he was, with the tree trailing along behind him.

When he reached the smithy, he noticed that the lights were on in the windows and he heard voices and singing. That made him even angrier.

'So you decided to celebrate without me, did you?' he shouted angrily. He tensed his muscles and the straps fell off; then he seized the oak and thrust it into the ground with such force that the tree immediately took root and stood there as though it had grown there all its life.

The people in the house, hearing the noise, ran out to see what was happening. The first to see Jepas was Bessie, who cried out in fright. On seeing the tree, from which bits of the straps still trailed, she was even more horrified, but it also aroused in her a sense of great admiration. It was only now that she realised how strong Jepas really was. To be able to overturn such a tree and carry it all the way here — that was a real knight errant's task! What woman could resist such a mighty man?

Suddenly Bessie ran up, threw her arms round Jepas's neck and began kissing him.

'This is my husband,' she cried joyfully.

But Jepas shook her off and turned to his father. 'How is it that you are celebrating without me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know that Bessie was my wife?'

'No, we didn't,' said the smith. 'Your brothers said they had lost you somewhere on the way.'

'And didn't my wife tell you how they bound me up when I was asleep?' asked Jepas again.

'No, we knew nothing of that.'

'Then I won't have anything to do with her!' shouted Jepas angrily. He turned on his heel and left.

'Jepas, Jepas! — wait a moment!' wailed Bessie. She ran after him shouting, 'Please come back, please forgive me!' But he didn't even look round, just strode off faster, and soon disappeared from sight.

Bessie sat on the ground and wept. The others ran up and tried to console her. The two brothers, glad that it had ended like that and that Jepas had not done anything worse to them for their trick, now persuaded their sister-in-law not to be upset, saying she could choose whichever one of them most suited her fancy. But she stood up, wiped away her tears and said, 'I don't want either of you; I want my Jepas. He's a thousand times better than both of you put together. You cheated him, you stole his wife and he — even if he is such a strong chap and can uproot an oak, roots and all — he never did the least thing to you. I shall follow him, wherever he has gone, and I shall go on beseeching him to forgive me and take me back.'

She went into the house, tied her belongings into a kerchief, took her leave of the parents and set off on her journey.

She trudged on a long, long way, until suddenly she saw a strange fellow standing before her in the path. When she looked at him at first, she thought he was walking backwards. But when she passed by him, she got a shock — he had two faces: one at the front and one at the back. What was more, he had four arms and four legs, so that he looked the same from the front as from the back. She wanted to run away, but he looked at her and asked, 'Where are you off to, my beauty?'

'Nowhere,' replied Bessie and walked faster. But he caught up with her, took her hand and said, 'Nowhere, that suits me fine! Then you'll come with me.' She tried to stop him, but he took hold of her with his four arms and raced along with her on his four legs, faster than any horse could have run. He carried her off to the top of the glass mountain, where he had his palace. There he placed her on the ground and said, 'Now, you will be my wife. I am a powerful magician and I will produce anything you wish with my magic.' But she didn't want anything, and so she just wept and wept. That annoyed him, and he said he would leave her there all alone till she came to her senses.

'In three days' time, at dusk, when the first star appears, I shall be back and see what you've decided,' he said, and left her.

When Bessie was at last alone, she examined the summit of the glass mountain and saw that, without outside help, she would never get away. The mountain was steep and quite smooth-sided. She sat down by the gates of the palace and wept bitterly. That's what I've got from not wanting my good husband, she said to herself; and she much regretted that she had behaved wrongly to Jepas.

When she ceased her weeping, she felt very lonely, and she started singing — just to hear a human voice. She sang a song which she had composed herself, about her happy life as the daughter of the King of the Gypsies, and about her unfortunate marriage to the strong young cripple. Her song told that she had wanted to leave him and marry one of his brothers, and that the three of them had cheated him. And then she sang of how

she had fallen in love with him in spite of his appearance, when he uprooted an immense tree, and of how she had followed him to try to pacify him when he left her. She sang of the magician who had two faces, four arms and four legs, and of how he had carried her off to this glass mountain, where he had imprisoned her. The last verse of her song was a sorrowful one in which she expressed regret for her actions and wished for her husband to come to set her free.

When she finished singing, she heard a squawking voice above her head, 'That was a nice song! Wouldn't you like to sing it all over again? I would like to learn it.'

Bessie looked up in surprise and there, on the top of a pillar erected in front of the glass palace, was a big black bird. It was a jackdaw and it spoke the human tongue, because the magician had taught it to speak, so that he would have someone to keep him company.

'Who are you?' asked Bessie. 'You didn't half give me a fright!'

'You needn't be afraid of me,' croaked the jackdaw, 'I belong to the magician. But I don't like him and I'm sorry for you. If you like, I will help you.'

'How can you help me?' sighed Bessie.

'Teach me the song you were singing just now, and I will fly to your husband. I am sure I will find him. I'll repeat your fond words to him, in which you praise his heroism, and I am sure he will forgive you and set you free.'

Bessie delightedly taught the jackdaw her song. The bird learned it quickly, because it was very good at imitating, then it spread its wings and flew off. It flew hither and thither, until at last it found Jepas. He was lying on his back under a tree, fast asleep. The jackdaw perched on a branch close above his head and croaked loudly. But Jepas didn't wake. So it flew down on to his breast and began pecking at his face with its beak. Jepas woke and tried to catch it with his good hand, but the jackdaw quickly flew out of reach and began croaking out Bessie's song. Of course the song didn't sound nearly so fine as when Bessie had sung it, but Jepas thought it all sounded rather interesting, and began listening carefully. When the jackdaw had finished, he jumped up.

'Who taught you that song, little bird?' he asked.

'Who else but your wife Bessie,' answered the jackdaw. 'If you wish to free her, I could guide you to the glass mountain.'

'Show me the way, then,' said Jepas. The jackdaw took wing and flew low so that Jepas could follow it all the way to the glass mountain. But as soon as he saw the mountain, he realised that it wouldn't be all that easy to reach Bessie. He thought a moment and then told the jackdaw to fly up and tell his wife that he had arrived and wanted to liberate her, that she should make a search of the magician's home and collect every kind of rope, material or stuff from which she could plait a rope-ladder. Then she should set to work

and make it. As soon as the ladder was long enough, she should fasten it firmly at the top and let it down.

When the jackdaw delivered Jepas' instructions, Bessie was overjoyed and set to work, collecting what he had ordered. She took all the sheets and curtains in the magician's house and every conceivable rag, tore them all up into long strips and began plaiting the ladder. She worked a whole day and a whole night, but the ladder still was not long enough.

On the morning of the day the magician was to return at dusk, Bessie had used up all the materials she could lay her hands on. When she threw the ladder down the side of the mountain, it was still a bit short. She searched the whole house, but couldn't find another thread anywhere. Whereupon Jepas, with the help of the jackdaw, told her to cut off her own hair and plait it into the ladder.

Bessie did as she was told. She cut off her two long plaits right by her head and set to completing the ladder. By late afternoon it was ready. This time, when she let the ladder down, it was just long enough for Jepas to reach. He seized hold of the first rung and hastily began climbing it. The ladder swayed from side to side and Jepas had to stop several times for a rest. By the time he reached the top, it was evening. Just as he was about to embrace his wife, the first stars appeared in the heavens. And in that instant — from out of nowhere — the magician stood there before them.

'You want to kidnap my bride from me, do you?' he asked threateningly.

'She is my wife,' answered Jepas. 'A priest blessed our marriage and you've no right to keep her captive.'

The magician laughed wildly. 'I don't care two hoots for your priest,' he shouted. 'This woman belongs to the person who wins her in battle. I challenge you to a fight. Whichever of us wins will keep Bessie by right of being the stronger!'

'Very well,' agreed Jepas. He released his wife from his arms and only then did the magician realise that his opponent had one lame arm. Then he noticed that Jepas limped. 'Have I got to wrestle with a cripple like you?' he shouted angrily. 'Be off with you, you miserable creature!'

'Just wait a moment and you'll see!' laughed Jepas. He made a swipe at the magician with his mighty left arm. The latter never dreamt he would receive such a powerful blow from a cripple. In his surprise, he staggered, lost his balance and fell head first down the side of the glass mountain.

Jepas took his wife round the waist, she held on to the ladder, and they slithered down it like lightning. Finally they stood at the bottom on firm ground. Jepas went to have a look to see what had happened to the magician. He soon found him, lying there at the foot of the glass mountain, just like a miserable piece of rag. He was dead.

Bessie fell on her knees before her husband and begged him to forgive her. 'That's past and done with,' answered Jepas. 'I forgave you the moment the jackdaw sang me your song. Are you really sorry for what you did? Do you want to stay with me and be my faithful wife? If not, tell me honestly and I will take you back to your father.'

'I like you, and I want to stay with you, if you won't drive me away,' answered Bessie.

'Come along then . . .' Jepas took his wife by the hand. At that moment a squawking voice was to be heard above their heads, 'Are you going to leave me here?' They both looked up. It was the jackdaw. 'Take me with you,' it begged. 'I've no one else in the world, and I like you two.' So they took the bird with them and the jackdaw was very grateful. It would sing the song which Bessie had sung that day to all who wished to hear it. And that is how the song came to be known among the gypsies and how the tale of mighty Jepas and beautiful Bessie has been preserved to this day.

Dilino and the Devil

Once there was a gypsy family of charcoal-burners — a father, mother and three sons. The two elder were bright, capable lads, but the third was just a simpleton and a muddler. They called him Dilino. No matter what he turned his hand to, he always muddled things. In the end they found it safer not to give him any work to do at all.

The charcoal-burner and his two sons used to make charcoal in the forest, but one year there was a very hard winter and the demand for charcoal became so great, that the three of them were unable to cope with the work.

'Why don't you tell Dilino to help us?' the brothers asked their father grumpily. The latter summoned his youngest son and said, 'Can't you see the way we're all sweating ourselves to the bone? You just laze beside the stove and don't help at all.'

'But I would be glad to help you, Father,' answered the simpleton. 'Just tell me how — where I am to go and what I have to do.'

'You talk as though you'd just dropped from heaven,' said the father angrily. 'Where you're to go? Why, to the forest, of course. And what you're to do? Why, make charcoal!'

'Very well,' agreed Dilino willingly, and he hurried out.

'Wait a moment!' shouted his father. 'Have you got an axe and a sack?'

'What are the axe and sack for?' asked Dilino, surprised.

'Why, for wood and charcoal, of course,' replied his father.

'Oh, I see,' grinned the simpleton. He took an axe and a sack, threw them over his shoulder and set off for the forest. He wandered around there until dusk, whistling gaily and at times wondering how one makes charcoal. I suppose I'll have to start a fire, he mused, but where shall I get the charcoal? They didn't tell me about that. And why have I got this axe here? For the charcoal or the wood? And what is the sack for? The devil if I know what it's all about.

By now it was evening, yet Dilino in his foolish, muddle-headed way still hadn't sorted out the riddle of what to do to make charcoal. Finally his head ached so from all the worrying, that he told himself he would go home and ask them once more in detail. But the nearer he got to the house, the less he felt like meeting his father and his brothers with nothing to show.

'I'm sure they'll tease me again and call me an idiot,' he muttered, 'but it's all their fault. Why have they never explained these things to me properly?'

While he was dawdling along, frowning to himself, suddenly he noticed an old hollow tree. 'You're just an old bit of lumber,' he said. 'It's high time someone cut you down. You're just taking the light and room needed by the young trees.' And as he was feeling fed up, he plunged his axe into the tree. The tree shivered and seemed to sigh.

'Why are you sighing?' asked Dilino annoyed. 'You're as decayed as a bad tooth — down you come!' Once again he swung his axe and struck a blow at the trunk.

Now, in the hollow of that tree lived a devil. He lived there because he had been driven out of Hell for disobeying the laws of Hell, and the King of the Devils, Beelzebub, had put him under a spell in this tree for seven years, seven months and seven days. If he managed to stay in the tree all that time, then he would be taken back and pardoned. If, however, he ran away before that, or if in the meantime someone cut down the tree, then he would never be allowed to return to Hell.

You can imagine how miserable the devil was, when he realised that this young fellow was striking his tree with an axe. He must frighten him, so that he would stop.

'Be off with you!' he shouted from the hollow in the most fearful voice he could muster. 'Get away from my tree, you insolent fellow! I'm a devil and this is my house. Just you dare strike another blow at my house and you had better look out!'

'What am I to look out for?' asked Dilino innocently, not the least bit frightened. Stupid people aren't usually easily shocked, because it always takes a few moments for them to understand what's going on.

'Well — you look out!' growled the devil, not knowing himself what he could do to this fellow, as he couldn't climb out, and it would be hard to do anything to him from inside the tree. 'It will be safer not to try,' he added warningly.

'But if I want to try, I will!' said Dilino, and he rammed his axe into the tree for the third time.

By now the devil was getting really frightened. He saw that this chap was not afraid of him, and surely he must be some mighty powerful hero. So he decided that it would be better to try to come to terms.

'Look here,' he entreated, 'can't you leave my tree alone? Do you need wood? If so, I'll give you as much as you want and better than you would get from this old tree, which is half rotten.'

'No, I don't need wood, I want charcoal,' answered Dilino.

'Well, I'll give you charcoal,' promised the devil, 'and what's more, it will be better than any you've ever seen. Have you got a sack?'

'Yes, I have.'

'Then throw it into the hollow of the tree and I'll fill it for you.'

Dilino threw the sack into the hollow of the tree, and when he pulled it out it really was full of charcoal. He was delighted and threw the sack over his shoulder and went home. The sack was heavy, but luckily he had not far to go. Dilino was no weakling — what he lacked in common sense, he made up for in strength — but he had certainly never had to carry such a heavy weight before on his back. By the time he reached home, he was completely exhausted.

'Oh, I'm glad I made it,' he sighed, when he'd slammed the sack down on the ground. 'Here's your charcoal! Now give me some supper, I'm hungry.'

'Fancy that,' said the old man surprised. 'Dilino isn't such a simpleton after all. He's actually brought some charcoal.' He untied the sack and was amazed. The charcoal which rolled out was only half black; the other half of each piece glittered like pure gold.

'What sort of charcoal is this?' exclaimed the brothers, and they examined it carefully.

'Where did you get this?' asked his father.

'Dunno,' replied Dilino with his mouth full, making the most of a plate of potatoes baked in their skins. 'I threw the sack into a tree and some devil or other filled it for me. I don't really remember quite how it happened.' And they got no more out of him.

Now the gypsies were in clover. When they had cut the gold from the charcoal and sold it, they had more money than they knew how to spend. The two elder brothers built themselves houses and got married.

'Aren't you going to build yourself a house and get married, too?' the father asked the youngest son.

'What do I want a house for?' replied the simpleton. 'I like being here with you and mother. Who would do my cooking?'

'Your wife, of course,' answered the father.

'Where can I find one?'

'You have to look for one, like your brothers. Choose a nice, pretty young gypsy girl and I'll go to her parents and ask for her hand for you.'

'Very well,' nodded Dilino. 'Go to the king and ask him for his daughter's hand for me.'

'The king won't give you his daughter,' explained the father impatiently, 'even if you do have lots of money. You're a gypsy and she is not — you should choose one of us.'

'I don't want to,' said Dilino obstinately, 'I want a princess. Just go to the castle and ask for her!'

'You're a fool,' said the old man. 'The king wouldn't even speak to me; he would throw me out and set the dogs on me.'

'I'd just like to see him try!' said Dilino angrily. And he jumped down from behind the stove, seized his axe and hurried out.

'Where are you going with that axe?' asked his father, taken aback. 'Not to the king, I hope? To the devil with you, you . . .'

'Sure, that's just where I am going,' laughed Dilino, and he was gone.

'That son of ours has gone quite crazy,' sighed the mother. But Dilino went to the forest and made straight for the hollow tree. He swung his arms and made two great chops at the tree trunk.

'Be off with you!' cried the devil from inside. 'Be off with you, you insolent fellow. I'm a devil, and if you dare strike another blow, you'd better beware, or you'll be sorry for it.'

'I know you, you're just boasting,' said Dilino calmly. 'It's me, the one you gave the charcoal to. Today I need something else. If you don't give it to me, I'll chop your house down.'

'What do you want,' asked the devil, fearful that this fellow would carry out his threat. He now only had seven months and seven days left to the end of his punishment.

'You know what I need?' said Dilino, 'Something that would make me invulnerable. Some sort of magic water, or the like. They tell me I'm an idiot, so I don't know exactly what it ought to be. You're a devil and you're supposed to be clever, so get me something, quick!'

'That's very hard . . .' said the devil, hedging. 'Some magic water — it's not as easy as all that.'

'Very well, then, I'll hack your rotten old den to pieces,' shouted Dilino, and he slammed his axe into the tree, till the oak shivered and shook.

'Wait a moment!' cried the devil anxiously. 'Wait a moment, I'll give you the water. Have you got a bottle with you?'

'No, I haven't.'

'And I'll even have to provide you with a bottle, bother you,' grumbled the devil. 'It'll take a bit of time though . . .'

'That's no matter. I'll wait; I've time to spare,' replied Dilino nonchalantly. And he threw his axe on the ground, sat down by the tree and waited.

Finally the devil called out again, 'Shove your hand into the hollow of the tree and you'll get what you asked for.' Dilino was just going to do as he was bid, when suddenly he remembered the saying: There's no compromising with the devil . . . Supposing the devil wanted to cheat him? Out loud he said, 'Throw the magic water out; I'll catch it!'

'If you break the bottle,' warned the devil, 'you won't get another.'

'You'll give me just as many as I wish,' retorted Dilino, 'otherwise that'll be the end of your tree.'

Inside the hollow the devil was trembling with rage, but he threw him out the bottle all the same. Dilino caught it and went home.

'Take your clothes off, Father!' he said. 'I've got some magic water here. I'll rub you all over with it, so that you can go to the king and ask him for his daughter's hand for me. If he sets the dogs on you, nothing will happen, because after being rubbed with this, you'll be invulnerable.'

At first the charcoal-burner wouldn't have anything to do with it, but as his son was quite relentless, finally he humoured him to get a bit of peace. When Dilino had rubbed him with the devil's water, the old man set off for the castle. There, they wouldn't even let him inside the gates. Even though he had on his best clothes, they recognised him for what he was.

'What do you want, gypsy?' asked the guard.

'I've come to see the king, to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage for my son,' replied the charcoal-burner. Of course the guard just laughed at him and threw him out. But he didn't go away. He knocked at the gate again and shouted to the guards to let him in. Whereupon the great gate opened and a pack of wild dogs hurled themselves at the charcoal-burner. They rushed at him, wanting to tear him to pieces, but the moment they came close to him, they began to whine and whimper and back away from him, though he didn't lift a finger to defend himself.

When the servants saw this, they were amazed. One of them went straight into the castle and told the king.

'There's a shabby old gypsy outside the great gate,' said the servant breathlessly, 'and he won't be dissuaded. He insists on coming to see you to ask for your daughter's hand for his son.'

'Why didn't you throw him out?' asked the king angrily.

'We did,' replied the servant, 'but he just stayed put. Then we set the dogs on him, but they're afraid of him and won't even bite him. He just stands there and says he must speak with you.'

'Take the seven-pounder and shoot at him with the full barrel load!' ordered the king.

So they took the seven-pounder and shot straight at the gypsy. When the smoke cleared away, they all expected that there would be nothing of the gypsy left in front of the gate. But there he was, standing there and shouting that they should take him to the king.

The servants ran to the king and told him what had happened.

'That can't be an ordinary person,' said the king, taken aback, and he ordered them to let the gypsy in. When he was brought before the king, the king said, 'Who are you then and what do you want?'

'I'm a charcoal-burner,' replied the gypsy. 'My son has taken it into his head that he intends to marry your daughter, and he won't take no for an answer. He just won't hear of it. So what was I to do? He ordered me to come here and ask you for your daughter's hand on his behalf.'

Now the king decided that the son of a man who could not be harmed by a seven-pound gun must surely be some mighty magician, whom it would be advisable not to provoke, so he said, 'Tell your son that he should come and present himself, and we'll discuss the matter together.'

'Very well, I'll tell him,' answered the charcoal-burner, and he went home.

Meanwhile, the story had gone round that some gypsy had come to the king asking for the princess's hand in marriage for his son and that this daring act had provoked the king so much that he had had him shot at with the seven-pounder. The news even reached

the gypsies and made them very angry. But the charcoal-burner's wife wept and blamed her youngest son for being the cause of his father's death.

'What's the fuss?' answered Dilino calmly. 'Just look out of the window; there's father himself.'

And, in truth, the old man was just walking in through the door.

'Well, what did the king say?' asked Dilino.

'He said,' replied his father, 'that you should go and present yourself, and together you would discuss when the wedding was to be and other details.'

'What's that about presentations?' grumbled Dilino. 'It's quite unnecessary. Go there once more yourself and ask when the wedding is to be. Let him fix a date! I'm not going to the castle till then.'

'But you don't even know what the princess looks like,' cried the charcoal-burner's wife. 'Surely you don't want to marry a pig-in-a-poke?'

'That's not important; I'm not fussy,' replied Dilino. 'The main thing is that she must be a princess. I don't want to marry just any woman. And she'll live here with me and cook for me and wash my clothes, like any other.'

'Suppose she won't want you?' asked his mother.

'She will,' laughed Dilino, and he climbed back behind the stove.

So the charcoal-burner got up and went off to the castle again. When he had delivered Dilino's message to the king, the king was so angry that he ordered them to throw the gypsy out and told them to shoot at him this time with the eight-pounder, the largest gun he had. But once again the shot didn't harm the gypsy at all. The king was so dismayed, that he called him back, apologised profusely and fixed a date for the wedding.

'But please tell your son for me, that I hope he'll turn up to the wedding dressed properly,' he added. 'And if he wants to bring some guests with him, they must be respectable people. I don't want any scandal, do you understand?'

When the old man passed the message on, Dilino just grinned, climbed down from behind the stove, seized an axe and went off to the hollow tree. He struck one blow at it, then another, and right away the devil was whining from inside, 'Is that you here again, you wretch?' He had only seven more days to go before his release.

'Yes,' said Dilino, 'but this really will be the last time I ask for your help. I'm to marry the princess, and I need to be able to arrange a great many things about which I know very little, because I never had to get married before.'

'What kind of things?' asked the devil.

'Well — you never know, all sorts . . .' Dilino began scratching behind his ear. 'How am I to know what's needed? Give me such power that I'll always be able to arrange whatever is required at the right moment.'

'You think it's all that easy?' sighed the devil. But when he realised that Dilino was swinging his axe again, he added quickly, 'Very well, I'll give you something so that you'll leave me in peace. But remember, this really is the last time!'

'Just what I was telling you,' muttered Dilino.

'Well then — climb this tree. It's an oak and it has acorns. Among them, right at the top, there is one gold one. Pluck it and keep it in a safe place. When you want something, put the golden acorn in your mouth and think your wish in your mind. It will come true.'

'That sounds all right,' agreed Dilino. He climbed to the top of the oak, looked around for a moment, and, indeed, there was the golden acorn. He picked it and put it away in his pocket. When he was safe on the ground again, the devil said, 'I'll be coming for that acorn as soon as I'm released from this tree. You've more luck than common sense that you found me just at this time, at a moment when I couldn't leave this tree.'

'That's the way the world is,' laughed Dilino. 'Those with little sense have the most luck,' and he went home.

When the day arrived that the king had chosen for the wedding, Dilino crawled out from his den, stretched and yawned and said, 'If I'm not mistaken, I'm getting married today; I'm off to the castle.'

'Good gracious!' said his mother, wringing her hands. 'You mean to go looking like that? Your clothes all crumpled and messy — to your own wedding?'

'Well — yes, that'll be good enough.'

'And you're not even inviting us?' asked his mother reproachfully. 'And what about our friends? When they learn that you got married and that they were not invited to the wedding, they'll not forgive us till their dying days.'

'Let them all come, anyone who wishes,' said Dilino.

Whereupon there was soon a horde of ragged, shabby-looking gypsies making its way to the castle. Only his mother and father were properly dressed. Their son wouldn't listen to a word from them and wouldn't smarten himself up in the least.

At the castle everything was in readiness for the wedding. Guests had been invited, the gates were decorated with garlands and the rooms were all decked out in flowers for the occasion. The table for the king's relatives and guests was loaded with splendid food and drink. The princess was dressed in white and wore a garland in her hair, but she was all atremble with fear to know what her bridegroom would be like. She knew nothing about him except that he was a gypsy and some powerful kind of magician. She was afraid of him, but nonetheless was also rather curious to see what he would look like.

Suddenly one of the guards came running to the king and breathlessly announced that a crowd of ragged gypsies was making its way towards the castle. They were singing and shouting, and could be heard miles off. At the head of them was a young fellow, the

dirtiest and the raggedest looking of them all, and he was shouting that he was the bridegroom.

When the princess heard this, she cried out in dismay, fell to the ground and fainted. There was utter disorder, and they had much ado to bring her round. Meanwhile, the gypsies had reached the gates and had begun hammering on them with their fists. 'Let us in!' they cried. 'We're the bridegroom's guests and we've come for the wedding.'

The unhappy king had no idea what to do. If he didn't let them in, the bridegroom would be angry and who knows what such a gypsy magician might do in revenge? He might cast a spell on the princess. Finally he decided to let the gypsies in, but only as far as the courtyard. He ordered some garden tables and chairs to be set out, and the remains of the royal guests' feast to be brought out to them. The gypsies crushed into the courtyard, pushing their way in round the rough garden tables and chairs; the hungry wedding guests could hardly wait for the banquet food, and some of them noticed a large cherry tree standing in the corner covered with fine fruit, climbed it, and began picking the fruit.

The king saw it all and wrung his hands. But what was he to do? Finally they succeeded in bringing the princess round and led her to the chapel. When Dilino stepped up to her, the poor thing didn't even dare lift her eyes to see what her bridegroom was like. She was as white as a sheet and kept her eyes cast on the ground, where she saw only his bare dirty feet and torn trousers.

The strange pair went up to the altar, where the priest was waiting to marry them. But at that moment something unexpected happened. Dilino felt for his pocket, pulled out the golden acorn and put it in his mouth. In that instant the king and his guests cried out in amazement. Beside the princess stood a handsome youth, dressed in splendid clothes of silk and brocade, richly embroidered in gold and silver. The bride also noticed that suddenly in place of the bare, dirty feet beside her, there was a pair of beautiful shiny polished boots. She quickly raised her eyes and her cheeks blushed with joy, on seeing the bridegroom she was to marry. True, he was a trifle sallow in colour, but he had wonderful eyes — like burning phosphor, black wavy hair curling over his forehead, a nose like an eagle's and teeth like two rows of pearls.

The princess, who was also very lovely, especially when she blushed, fell in love with him at first sight. She grasped her bridegroom's hand and said her 'Yes' so loudly, that it was even heard outside the chapel. Dilino glanced at his bride and was also satisfied. He hadn't expected her to be so beautiful.

As the wedding guests emerged from the chapel — Dilino at the side of his bride, who held on to him like a limpet — a further surprise awaited them. There was not a trace of the crowd of gypsies who only a short while before had been shouting and disturbing

people in the courtyard. In place of them, seated at the tables now covered with snow-white cloths, there was a completely different set of people. They were handsome and beautifully dressed, sallow-complexioned people, who behaved most decorously and correctly. The smell of the food set before the gypsies was so tempting, that the king's guests looked on in envy.

'Who gave this food to these people?' asked the king of his chamberlain discreetly. 'Surely you haven't given them what was prepared for our own guests?'

'No, sir, theirs is far better,' whispered the chamberlain. 'I don't know where it all came from. Just look at the gold and silver dishes! We've nothing like that.'

This the king knew only too well, and he was glad he had not been obstinate and refused to give his daughter in marriage to this gypsy, who must be a very powerful magician.

But one of his guests, a greedy fellow, peeped into some of these delicious-smelling

dishes as they passed, and when the king's guests reached the royal dining hall and the servants began handing round the first course, he whispered to his neighbour, 'It's an insult! They've cooked chicken for us but the king has ordered pheasant to be roasted for the other guests outside!'

The news spread and the king's guests were offended. One by one they got up and left. Those in the courtyard, however, still carried on with their feast. There seemed to be an endless supply of the splendid exotic food and drink in those golden dishes and goblets.

Suddenly Dilino looked round and noticed that, apart from his wife, the king, the head chamberlain and servants, there was no one left. So he said, 'There are too few of us. Let's go to the courtyard and join my folk. I like to have plenty of people around at a feast.'

So they went out to the courtyard, and the gypsy guests made room for Dilino, his wife and the king, and continued feasting. The king enjoyed himself very much and he had to admit that he had never tasted such delicious things in his life. Dilino's wife, however, ate very little, and never took her eyes off her husband, looking highly satisfied all the while.

Finally, Dilino rose and said, 'Come, wife, it's time to go home!'

The princess jumped up gaily, and the king said he would have the carriage harnessed. But Dilino waved his hand, and told him not to bother. He put the acorn in his mouth, and in that instant a splendid carriage stood there in the courtyard, drawn by six black chargers. The king couldn't take his eyes from them. He helped his daughter into the carriage, pressed a purse of golden coins, which he was offering as his daughter's dowry, into Dilino's hand, and suddenly there were rows of other carriages into which the bridegroom's parents and other guests climbed. One by one they drove out of the gates and the king waved to them and tears of joy ran down his face as he thought how well he had married off his daughter.

But they had not travelled far, when suddenly the princess in the carriage asked her husband, 'What's your name, by the way?'

'Dilino,' he blurted out, forgetting the golden acorn which he had had in his mouth up to that moment. As he spoke, it stuck in his throat and he began to choke.

The princess, seeing him go red in the face, gave him a mighty slap on the back. The golden acorn flew out of Dilino's mouth, fell on the road and rolled in front of the carriage.

'Stop, stop!' shouted the dismayed Dilino, as soon as he could speak. But by then it was too late. From out of the blue, suddenly, there in the roadway stood the devil. He bent down, picked up the acorn and cried out scornfully, 'That's the end of your good luck, young gypsy!' And then he chortled once and was gone. Only a smell of sulphur was left behind him in the road.

In that instant the carriage and horses also disappeared, and Dilino, barefoot and ragged, stood beside his dismayed bride, surrounded by a shouting horde of ragged, dirty-looking gypsies.

The king, who had seen it all from a balcony, was in despair. He called an officer and ordered him to take a company of soldiers to follow the gypsy and bring back his daughter.

Meanwhile Dilino and his wife and the others continued on foot. The princess was weeping quietly.

'Why are you crying?' asked her husband gruffly. 'Doesn't it suit you to have married me because I'm a gypsy?'

'That's not why I'm crying,' sobbed the princess, 'but because the soldiers are coming for us. The king saw what happened, and he is sure to have sent them to bring me back.'

'And you don't want to go?' asked Dilino. 'Do you want to stay with me, even if I am only a poor charcoal-burner and a gypsy?'

'Well, you've got my dowry,' said the princess, 'and the fact that you are a gypsy doesn't worry me at all. I like you.'

'Then don't cry, I'll fix it,' said Dilino. He halted, and when the soldiers rode up, he said to the officer, 'What do you want?'

'The king has ordered us to take the princess home,' replied the officer, drawing his sword.

'But she doesn't want to go,' answered Dilino. 'She is my wife in holy wedlock and wishes to live with me always.'

'Is that true, princess?' asked the officer. 'Don't be afraid of this gypsy. Look him in the eye and tell him he lies. If you so wish, I'll cut him down this instant.'

'Rather cut me down,' said the princess, 'because I love him and I shall never give him up.'

'Well, if it's like that,' said the officer, 'that's your affair and there's nothing I can do. Goodbye!' And he turned his horse and galloped back to the castle.

The princess never regretted that she had married the gypsy. From the moment Dilino ceased 'to have the luck of the devil' his mind acquired such a sharpness, that he was no longer 'Dilino — the simpleton', but became a prudent, diligent charcoal-burner. Dilino and his wife lived happily together, they had many children, and if they haven't died yet, they're living happily together to this very day.

The Four Brothers

There was once a gypsy king who had three sons. When they were almost grown up, his wife gave birth to a fourth little boy, whom they called Mitras. Soon after his birth, however, his mother died.

Little Mitras had a much darker skin than his elder brothers, so they called him Kalo Mitras, the word Kalo in gypsy language meaning 'black'. Not only was he much darker, he was also that much brighter and cleverer. He could walk by the time he was a year old, and by the time he was a year and a half, he could chatter enough for everyone to understand him. The king was especially delighted about this and decided that he would make his youngest son his successor. The elder brothers were very jealous of the little one, but they dared not do him any harm, as the king guarded him very carefully.

One day the brothers agreed together to forsake their clan, which roamed the world, and decided to look for some sort of work in an army.

'What is there for us here?' said the youngest of the three, who was the one most annoyed by the fact that their father wanted to make little Mitras his successor. 'With our people we shall never get anywhere. As soldiers we can make names for ourselves and possibly even become officers.'

'But we would have to be sure not to betray that we are gypsies,' objected the middle one.

'We can pretend we are Rumanian warriors,' suggested the eldest. 'We're almost as pale-skinned as they.'

The others agreed. So they went to the king and informed him that they intended to leave his company and go out into the world to seek their fortunes. They asked him to give them horses and money, so that they could buy clothes and equipment, and the king agreed. He gave each of them a fine horse and some money, and off the lads rode.

They wandered about the world, hither and thither, till they came to a land where a king was just about to wage war with his neighbour and needed soldiers. They went to him to offer him their services. On the way they learnt that the king was glad to accept foreign soldiers, but on no account must they be gypsies.

'That's no matter to us,' they said, 'we're Rumanian warriors and we have royal blood in our veins.'

In this way they managed to get into the king's army. During the battle they fought bravely and were awarded high honours. The king himself pinned medals to their breasts, and while he was decorating the eldest one, he asked him on which day he had been born. The young fellow couldn't remember and so he just picked a date at random, the first that came to mind. By chance it happened to be the very day the king's eldest daughter had her birthday.

'What a coincidence!' exclaimed the king. 'My eldest daughter was born the very same day and year. Who are you, in fact?'

'I'm a Rumanian warrior and I have royal blood in my veins,' replied the eldest brother. As he was a handsome brave young lad, the king immediately contemplated the idea of giving him his daughter in marriage. He asked the youth what he thought of it; the soldier willingly agreed and soon enough he was celebrating his engagement to the princess. She had three other sisters. Two, who were old enough to marry, and one smaller one named Vera, who was still only six years old.

'That's a real coincidence,' said the eldest brother to his bride-to-be, when they were all sitting together at the engagement banquet. 'We've both got younger brothers and sisters of the same age. My two brothers here are just as old as your sisters and at home we have another little fellow who is just the age of your youngest sister . . .'

The middle brother quietly kicked his elder brother under the table, to make him shut up; but the king had heard, and said, 'It sounds like Fate. Perhaps she wants our two families to link together in marriage bonds. What do you think?' he said looking at his younger daughters. The two girls blushed with delight, because they thought very highly of the bridegroom's brothers.

The king immediately ordered that the three weddings should take place at once.

Some time later he said to the brothers, 'You know, you ought to go home and tell your parents that you're married. And when you return, bring your youngest brother along, too. He can live with us, and when he grows up, we'll marry him to our Vera.'

The brothers took fright. They knew very well that if they brought little Mitras along, it would betray the fact that they were all gypsies. So they tried to dissuade the king from his idea. But he insisted!

'Off you go!' he ordered. 'I'll give you presents to take for your father, and he is sure to agree to the youngest boy marrying my fourth daughter.'

So there was no getting out of it, and they had to obey.

Their father, the gypsy king, was delighted when he heard that they were royal army officers and that they had each married princesses. But when they conveyed their father-in-law's wish, the father was greatly distressed. He was most unwilling to part with

little Mitras, who was the only joy in his old age and whom he wanted to make his successor. At the same time he didn't want to stand in the way of the most beloved of his sons. All said and done, the King of the Gypsies was not a rich man and the king of the other country was both powerful and rich. So finally he let himself be persuaded and let Mitras go.

Kalo Mitras was eagerly looking forward to meeting the princess. On the way he kept asking his brothers whether she was pretty, and when they told him she was a perfect picture, and that she had golden locks and eyes as blue as the sky, he kept wanting to hear more. Finally it got on his brother's nerves, and the youngest of the three shouted, 'Don't keep asking questions. Who knows, when the king sees how dark you are, whether he'll want to marry her to you, at all.'

Mitras was taken aback. 'What's wrong with my being dark?' he asked. 'After all, I'm a gypsy.'

'That's exactly what you must never let the king know. He doesn't like gypsies,' his middle brother told him.

'Then how was it,' asked Mitras in astonishment, 'that he let you marry his daughters? For you are gypsies, too.'

'We didn't tell him,' explained the eldest. 'We persuaded him that we were Rumanian warriors, and you must say the same.'

'But I'm not ashamed of the fact that I'm a gypsy,' retorted Mitras.

'I don't know what we'll do with him,' said the eldest brother softly. 'He's such a little goose, he will spoil our fortunes as well as his own.'

'Let's throw him into the water here,' suggested the youngest of the three. At that moment they had ridden up to a river, which they would have to ford.

The eldest, who had taken Mitras in front of him on his horse, said, 'I don't like the idea of our brother being eaten by fishes.' Little Mitras didn't understand what they had been saying, as they talked in the language of that foreign kingdom and he didn't know it yet.

So they forded the river and came to a forest. They made a bonfire, had supper and lay down to sleep. Yet before they fell asleep the brothers agreed that, as soon as the little one was asleep, they would get up quietly, take their horses and leave him behind. But the horses neighed and Mitras woke up. When he saw his brothers about to ride off, he sprang up and ran after them, crying. They could easily have ridden off without him, but the eldest, who, after all, was not all that wicked-hearted, said, 'I can't bear hearing the little chap crying. If we leave him here, he'll die of hunger, or he'll be torn to pieces by wild beasts, and that would be terrible.'

'Let's take him part of the way with us and then we'll see,' agreed the middle one.

And it was only the youngest, who was least fond of Mitras, who frowned, but he held his peace.

They stopped, waited for the little fellow to catch up, and the eldest brother again picked him up and placed him in front of him on his saddle.

'Were you wanting to leave me there?' asked little Mitras, rubbing the tears from his eyes, because he had really been afraid.

'It was just a joke,' answered the eldest brother. 'We wanted to test whether you were a brave fellow or not.'

Mitras was ashamed that he had cried, and determined that next time he would be braver.

As they went their way the brothers were unable to think of any means of getting rid of the boy, but as they neared the capital city of that land, the youngest said, 'If we want to get rid of him, it's high time we did. I've an idea.' He then explained what they would have to do: 'Just by the castle the king has a den of lions,' he told them. 'As we ride past, we can throw the boy over the wall.'

'We ought to take his clothes off first,' suggested the middle one. 'The lions might not devour them, and if some clothes were found in the menagerie, it might betray us.'

This idea was more abhorrent to the eldest brother than either of the others, but as he greatly feared that Mitras would give them away, and he was terribly fond of his wife, he finally agreed.

As they came up to the castle, it was already late evening. The eldest halted his horse and told Mitras to climb down. The boy obeyed, and the middle brother told him to take off his clothes.

'But I'm cold,' objected Mitras.

'Cold, not cold,' said the youngest angrily, springing down from his horse, 'I'll see you take them off,' and he fell on the little one and pulled off his clothes.

'Stand with your horse by the wall,' the youngest told the middle brother. The latter rode up to the wall of the menagerie. The youngest seized the trembling Mitras, sprang on his brother's horse and held the boy up high. The little chap had no idea what was happening. Perhaps his brothers were testing him for bravery again, so he determined that he wouldn't cry or try to defend himself. He'd show them — even though he was small — that he was no coward. He clenched his teeth and let them carry on, let them do what they wished.

The youngest of the elder ones swung him back and forth and flung him over the wall and down. Then the brothers hastily mounted their horses and rode on to the castle. They had themselves ushered in before the king and told him that they had not been able to bring their small brother with them, as in the meantime the poor thing had died.

Kalo Mitras, however, had not even fallen on hard ground. When the lions smelled human beings approaching, they had gathered by the wall and the little boy had fallen on to their thick manes, not hurting himself at all. And at that moment it happened that the animals were not even hungry. The king's youngest daughter herself saw to it that they were properly fed, because they were her favourites. As a result, when the child fell on their backs, all they did was to sniff at him inquisitively. They formed a circle round him, squatted on their haunches and examined the boy with interest, doing him no harm whatsoever.

In all his life little Mitras had never seen a lion. He had never even heard that such animals existed in the world. And as he was fond of all living creatures, he was also pleased by these enormous great cats which had saved him in his fall with their soft bodies and which were now sitting round him in a circle, purring. They were breathing over him and keeping him warm. He stretched out a hand and stroked one of them. It happened to be the lioness which Princess Vera had trained from birth, and so was completely tame. She was used to being stroked by her mistress, and she let Mitras stroke her and scratch her behind the ears. The little fellow played with her awhile, then she stretched out her paws and he crept close to her warm body and fell asleep.

Each morning little Vera would go to the menagerie to feed her beloved animals. She would go there alone, for the lions never harmed her. This time when she arrived and found a small naked boy sleeping peacefully in the paws of her favourite lioness, she was quite amazed. She roused him and asked him who he was and how he had got there. But Kalo Mitras, on seeing her, cried out joyfully, 'Why, you must be Princess Vera.'

'So I am,' replied Vera even more amazed, 'but who are you? I've never seen you in my life.'

'They told me all about you,' replied Mitras. 'I came here, so that I could marry you when I grow up.'

'You?' asked Vera, astounded. 'But who are you, then?'

Mitras told her what had happened. Now Princess Vera, though she was only seven years old, was very clever. She could read and write and she borrowed books from the royal library, in which she read many wise things. She thought a moment and then said, 'I know why your brothers threw you into the menagerie. They were afraid to show you to the king, because it's obvious that you are a gypsy, and my father doesn't like gypsies.'

'And what about you?' asked Mitras.

Vera shook her head. 'I like everyone who is good and kind,' she said, 'and you are a good, brave boy. Your brothers are wicked, because they wanted to destroy you. But my sisters are fond of them, and so I won't tell father. Come with me, I'll lead you to a tower where I've got a little room. That's where I like to sit and read.'

Vera took Mitras by the hand and led him to the tower, where she had a little room furnished all for herself. There her breakfast was waiting for her. She shared it with her guest. Then she found some old clothes and tried to make something for Mitras to wear.

'You can live here,' she said. 'No one ever comes here except me. Then neither the king nor your brothers will ever learn that you are still alive.'

So Kalo Mitras remained there in the tower, and he didn't have a bad time at all. Princess Vera came to visit him every day and brought him food. She taught him to read and write, so that he could read her books, and they became great friends.

Five years passed. During this time no one discovered who it was that Princess Vera was hiding in her tower room. Then one fine day the king said to himself, 'I wonder what Vera really does in that tower, that she so often goes and sits there?' Full of curiosity he went there to have a look. And what a surprise he got, when he saw the strange dark boy and his daughter, reading and telling each other stories.

'What do you think you're doing here?' he thundered at the startled Mitras. 'Who are you?'

Vera quickly pulled herself together and replied, 'He's a good boy, Father. I took care

of him when some wicked relatives of his threw him into our menagerie, so that the lions would devour him.'

'When did that happen?' asked the king.

'Five years ago,' replied Vera.

'And you've been looking after him here all that time?' asked the king in amazement. 'Who are your relatives, my lad? Aren't they gypsies?'

'Yes, they are,' nodded Mitras.

'I always said gypsies were evil people,' said the king.

'But Mitras isn't,' assured Vera. 'He's good and clever. He knows how to read and write.'

'That's no matter,' said the king. 'He certainly can't stay here, and you must stop having anything more to do with him. It's not right for a king's daughter to be friends with a gypsy.'

Mitras frowned and was about to blurt out that the king's three elder daughters were also married to gypsies, but Vera's eyes told him to say nothing.

The king ordered the boy to go with him and he took him to the stables to his groom. 'Teach this boy to be a groom!' he ordered. 'If he is as clever as he seems, I'll keep him in my service.'

Kalo Mitras was indeed clever, and he learned quickly. The groom was satisfied with him and even spoke highly of him several times to the king. The king was pleased about this, too. He ordered his tailors to make a fine uniform for the boy, who would be present to assist the members of the court into their saddles.

Soon after he had taken up these duties it happened that the man Mitras had to help into his saddle was his eldest brother. When he saw the boy, he suddenly paled and said, 'What's your name?'

'Mitras,' answered the lad, who had also recognised his brother, but did not show it, because he was angry with him. The eldest brother went even paler, swung up on his horse and rode off swiftly. When he met his other brothers, he told them what had happened. 'Our Mitras,' he said, 'is still alive and works in the service of the king as a groom.'

'It's not possible,' cried the brothers. 'Surely he was devoured years ago by the lion.'

'I suppose not,' said the elder one, shrugging his shoulders. 'I recognised him and he me.'

'But the king doesn't know he's our brother, otherwise he would have had us chased away long ago,' said the middle one.

'If he hasn't betrayed us yet, I'm sure he soon will, and that will be the end of us,' muttered the youngest. 'We must poison him!'

The eldest now regretted that he had told his brothers about it, for he himself was glad that Mitras had not been devoured by the lions; but he was also afraid that the boy might betray them.

'Let's get some rat poison and bribe the cook to put it into his food,' suggested the youngest eagerly.

'I'll see to it,' said the eldest. But he hadn't really the heart to poison his little brother, who had already once escaped a terrible death. In place of rat poison he bought a sleeping powder. He sought out the cook, gave him a pile of coins and asked him to tip the powder into the food of the boy that helped in the stables. The cook agreed to do so.

Meanwhile Mitras, suspecting nothing, did all he could to please the groom. He hoped that if he succeeded in staying at the castle and in gaining the king's favour, one day he would be allowed to see Vera again. He longed to see her very much.

And the young princess longed to see Mitras, too. After seeing him every day for five years, she had grown accustomed to being with him and was very fond of him.

The very evening when the cook had tipped the sleeping powder into Mitras's food, Vera crept unobserved from the castle and ran to the stables. Just behind them Mitras had a small ramshackle wooden hut, where he slept and ate. The cook's servant had just brought him his supper and the boy had hungrily started eating it, when suddenly he heard someone knocking on the door. He went to open — and lo, there was Vera. What a joy that was! He asked her to come in.

Vera sat down on the only piece of furniture there was — a low bed. Mitras sat beside her and they started talking. Then Vera unpacked a napkin full of delicacies she had brought from her own supper.

'I'll have some,' said Mitras, 'but then you must have some of my supper too.' Vera, though she wasn't hungry any more, was afraid to disappoint him, so she ate up the portion he had left for her. Soon they both began to feel sleepy. Vera's head rolled on to Mitras's shoulder, and he also began to succumb. Soon they were both fast asleep.

Meanwhile, the younger brother wanted to convince himself that the elder brother had done what he had promised. He crept up to Mitras's hut and peeped inside through a crack. When he saw two sleeping figures, he opened the door quietly and went in. Bending over the sleepers, he realised that the young girl lying beside his brother was the youngest princess. He was taken aback, because he thought that both of them had been poisoned. But soon he realised that they were only asleep. He got up and ran to his brothers.

'You've cheated us,' he accused his eldest brother. 'Mitras isn't dead. He's asleep in his hut and Vera is lying asleep beside him.'

'That's excellent,' said the middle one. 'Nothing better could have happened. Why

should we have Mitras' life on our consciences? The king will do it for us. We'll take him to the hut and I bet you, when he sees his daughter with a gypsy he'll be so angry he'll have Mitras beheaded.'

That was a good idea, and the youngest brother ran to tell the king.

'Your daughter is certainly very friendly with your groom's servant, sir,' he told the king. 'Just come and have a look!'

His youngest son-in-law led the king to the hut. When the latter saw his daughter lying next to the gypsy boy, he was furiously angry, and in his rage he ordered his men to take the bed with the two sleeping children and throw it into the river. The brothers saw to it that the order was carried out immediately. When the king's initial rage died down, he bitterly regretted what had happened, but it was too late.

Kalo Mitras and Vera floated swiftly down the stream on their wooden bed and slept on. The first to come to his senses was Mitras. He looked round, rubbed his eyes and looked again — all around was water. He woke Vera and she, when she saw all that water, began crying.

'Don't cry,' comforted Mitras. 'We haven't drowned yet, and perhaps we won't now.'

Soon their raft caught in the shallows. Mitras jumped into the water, it was hardly up to his knees. Then he helped Vera to get off too, and taking her hand, together they waded to the bank.

'I'm hungry,' complained Vera.

'We're sure to find some sort of building soon, where we'll get something to eat,' Mitras assured her.

When they climbed the bank, suddenly they were met by a strong wind. It knocked Mitras' cap off his head and blew it along the path. Mitras ran after it to catch it, and Vera ran behind. But the wind drove the cap faster and faster, until it blew it into the wood. When the children caught up with it, they noticed that they were standing just in front of a tiny cottage.

'We'll get some food here, I'm sure,' cried Mitras. He went up to the door and knocked. But there was no answer. He turned the latch and opened the door. Vera peeped anxiously in over his shoulder.

In the middle of the dark room on a high three-legged stool sat a strange-looking old woman. Long grey hair fell on both sides of her yellow, wrinkled face.

'Good evening to you, grandma,' said Mitras. Vera greeted her too. The old woman didn't answer, nor did she move, only her pale bleary eyes stared at the intruders.

'Would you be so kind as to give us something to eat?' asked Mitras.

It was only then that the old woman moved, raised her arm and pointed to a low stove and opened her toothless mouth.

'There's some food there,' she said in a whimpering voice, 'but you must help yourselves, I can't leave my three-legged stool.'

Mitras took Vera's hand and drew her into the room. Suddenly, just behind them, there was a terrible crash. Mitras turned round, startled, and saw that a large sword lay on the ground behind them.

'You're lucky,' chuckled the old crone. 'If that sword of mine, which has been hanging from a spider's web for the last hundred years, had fallen on your heads, you would be dead now.'

'Why do you hang such a thing over the doorway and from a spider's web at that?' said Mitras gruffly.

'I didn't hang it there,' answered the crone. 'I have been sitting here on my three-legged stool for one hundred years, and I've been waiting for someone to come and release me. But through all that time no one has approached and opened these doors — no one, till you came. Well, you said you were hungry. Above the stove you'll find bread and milk. Help yourselves!'

The children helped themselves and ate up everything.

'I'm afraid we haven't left you anything,' said Mitras. 'I hope you're not angry.'

'No,' answered the old crone, 'but it's a real shame that you're only children. Since the sword didn't kill you, you could have helped me, but I'm afraid you won't be strong enough.'

'I'm quite strong,' said Mitras.

'Then pick up the sword!' she ordered. Mitras bent down for the sword — it was really heavy — and he managed to lift it, but only with great effort.

'For your size you are strong, indeed,' said the old crone, 'but surely you haven't enough strength in you to cut off my head with it, have you?'

'Why should I do that,' asked the astonished Mitras. 'For your kindness? For giving us food?'

'You would be doing me a great favour,' sighed the old woman. 'Not until someone comes and cuts off my head, shall I be able to get down from this three-legged stool on which I am sitting, and until then the beautiful city enchanted within it will continue to remain hidden from the surface of the earth. If you had enough strength and would cut off my head, you would become a great ruler.'

'I think I could do it,' said Mitras, 'if Vera would help me.'

'Oh no,' cried Vera, terrified. 'We can't do that.'

'That's right, you must help him, little lady,' begged the old woman. 'You've no idea what a service you would be doing me.'

'Let's do it for her sake, if she really wants us to,' said Mitras persuasively. And finally Vera agreed. Together they lifted the heavy sword and went up to the old woman. Vera shut her eyes, so that she wouldn't have to look, but Mitras was excited. He swung his arms — and the old woman's head rolled on the ground.

In that instant a terrible sound echoed all around them. Then there were shouts of joy, rejoicings and cries of 'Hurrah! Long live our deliverers!'

The amazed children saw that on all sides they were surrounded by a delighted crowd. The room had disappeared, and there was not a trace of the cottage. Everywhere there were beautiful tall houses and broad streets along which carriages rolled and crowds of people trooped and music was being played.

The crowd lifted Mitras and Vera on their shoulders and carried them, to the accompaniment of ceaseless hurrahs, to the royal palace.

'You have delivered us from the spell and must be our rulers,' they cried.

So that was how Mitras and Vera became the rulers of this beautiful, rich city. They ruled well, even though they were still only children. And so time passed. In fact, in less than no time, five years had passed, and as they were now seventeen years old, they decided

they would get married. The entire city, which loved them dearly, was delighted at the idea. A few days before the wedding, Vera said, 'I would like to invite my father and my sisters to the wedding. You should send them a message to come here.'

'Then my brothers would come with them, the brothers, as you remember, who wanted to kill me, and who surely are responsible for our being thrown on the bed into the river,' objected Mitras.

But Vera begged for so long, that in the end Kalo Mitras agreed.

He sent messengers to Vera's father and asked him to come to their wedding together with all his family. Of course the king had never heard of the city, and he did not have any way of knowing that its ruler was that same gypsy whom he had had drowned five years previously, together with his own daughter.

'Where is your city?' he asked the messengers. 'I've never heard of it in my life and I've lived quite a while in this world.'

'You have not heard of it,' said the messengers, 'because there was no trace of it until a few years ago. It had been spellbound beneath the earth for one hundred years.'

'That sounds like something worth seeing,' said the king. And he ordered his horses to be harnessed and together with his three daughters and their husbands and their children, set out for the city.

Kalo Mitras received them politely. The king didn't recognise him, for how could it have occurred to him that this handsome young ruler was his groom's former gypsy servant. He was not even recognised by his own brothers. During those five years Kalo Mitras had grown so much that he was now a head taller than his eldest brother. Now he could easily carry the heavy sword with which he and Vera had just managed to cut off the old woman's head. He wore it now, girded to his waist and never went without it. And, of course, Vera had also changed. She had grown to be far more beautiful than her sisters had been at that age. They now were no longer beauties, but they each had several enchanting small children. Not even they nor their father recognised Vera. Indeed, she had to work hard to prevent herself from running to them and embracing them.

During the banquet Mitras and his bride sat at one side of the table and their guests were at the other. While the servants were carrying in the bounteous feast, the host whispered to the king, 'I sent a message asking you to come and bring your whole family with you. Are you all here?'

'Yes, we are,' answered the king.

'I heard that you had four daughters and I see only three,' said Mitras.

'I had four daughters,' sighed the king, 'but the youngest died five years ago.'

'What happened?' asked Vera.

'She was drowned,' replied the king quietly, and he bowed his head.

'Did you not keep good watch on her?' asked Mitras.

'It's a very sad story,' sighed the king again. 'I don't like to speak of it.'

'Oh, tell us,' begged Vera.

So the king began to tell them what had happened five years previously. When he had finished, he seemed very upset.

Kalo Mitras said, 'Did you not regret later, that you had had the children drowned?'

The king nodded. 'I regretted it greatly the very next day, and I sent a boat down the river to find them and bring them home. But the boatmen found only the empty bed. It was floating on the water. Presumably the children had fallen into the water and drowned.'

Vera could hardly restrain from crying out and giving herself away. But Mitras pressed her hand under the table to remind her to be quiet. Then he said, 'You were right to regret your wicked deed. After all, your children had done nothing wrong. Probably someone had given them a sleeping powder and they had fallen asleep.'

'How can you possibly know?' cried the king in astonishment.

'I know, because I myself am that gypsy boy you ordered to be drowned,' answered Mitras quietly.

'And I am your daughter,' cried Vera, jumping up. 'Didn't you recognise me?'

But at that moment Mitras' brothers also sprang up and drew their swords.

'It's a lie!' they shouted. 'Our brother has been dead for ages.'

'I am not dead, though you tried several times to see that I should be,' said Kalo Mitras calmly. 'You threw me to the lions when I was still a small child, and later you tried to destroy me, because I was dark and you were afraid that it would betray that we were all gypsies.'

At these words the king's three daughters all jumped up, too.

'What's that?' they cried in one breath. 'You are all gypsies?'

'It's not true,' shouted the brothers. And with drawn swords they rushed at Mitras. However, he had already drawn his heavy sword, and with one single swipe he knocked all the weapons out of his three brothers' hands.

'It's useless to deny it,' said Kalo Mitras. 'And you will also fail to destroy me if you try again. I am no longer a child and I've enough strength to defend myself. It would be better to admit the truth and beg your wives' forgiveness for having misled them so many years.'

The brothers bowed their heads and were silent. Finally, the eldest of the princesses spoke: 'I think, sisters, we shall have to forgive them . . . Are they not the fathers of our children?'

'I would forgive my husband for lying to me,' said the middle sister, 'but how can I forgive him for nearly killing our little sister Vera?'

'It doesn't worry me that my husband is a gypsy,' said the youngest of the king's three elder daughters, 'but how can I live with a man who wanted to destroy his own brother?'

'Vera and I have forgiven them,' said Kalo Mitras, 'so I think you can all forgive them too, if they honestly regret what they did.'

At these words all three brothers fell on their knees and begged their wives to forgive them. And these said, 'We will forgive you, if those whom you most wronged are no longer angry with you . . .'

And so they were all reconciled, and Kalo Mitras and Vera told them what had happened five years previously, when the king had had them thrown into the water. But you have already heard all about that, so let's leave them to their story-telling . . .

The Singing Violin

Once, long, long ago, there lived a rich baron and he had three daughters. Two were far from good-looking, but the third and youngest was a perfect picture. The eldest was called Susanna and was as tall and thin as a rake. She had large teeth and a hooked nose. The second, whom they called Kate, was small and dumpy. She had a face as red as a radish, legs like marrows and she squinted. The youngest, called Leila, was like a flower in May — pink-cheeked, enchanting and gay as a lark. Her voice was like that of the nightingale, and when she sang, anyone hearing it would stop and listen as though under a spell. But people loved her for more than her beauty, for she treated everyone kindly and lovingly. She didn't treat the servants badly, as her sisters did, and she was always generous to the poor.

The ruler loved Leila best, and so, of course, her sisters were jealous of her. From the time she was a child, they had not liked her, but as she grew up, they began to hate her, for they realised they would never find husbands as long as their younger sister was still in the house.

One day Susanna said to Kate, 'Couldn't we find some way of getting rid of that wretched girl? As long as she goes to the balls with us, we'll never find husbands.'

'Everyone has eyes only for her and no one takes any notice of us,' sighed Kate. 'Suppose we beg Father not to let her go anywhere, at least until we're married?'

'We can at least try,' said Susanna.

The two elder sisters went to their father and told him their wish. The old baron thought that the daughters might be right. And because he loved the youngest one so much, he was loath to lose her too soon. In his heart of hearts he longed to be rid of the two elder ones as soon as possible, for they were quarrelsome. So he called Leila and said to her, 'Listen, my little daughter, you are far too beautiful and you put your sisters in the shade, so that they'll never get married if you continue to go out with them. It would be better if you were to stay at home for a while, until they find husbands.'

'As you wish, Father,' replied the young one dutifully.

From that day on, she never left the house at all. Even so, however, the two elder sisters just simply couldn't find husbands. Even though Leila no longer went with them to the balls, they would sit there all night long — no one would ask them to dance, let alone ask for their hands in marriage.

One day Susanna turned to Kate again. 'Your idea hasn't led anywhere. So long as that young sister of ours is alive, we shall never have any luck.'

'She'll survive both of us,' sighed Kate.

'That depends on us,' cried Susanna.

'What do you mean?'

'Well — anyone can have bad luck, can't they?'

Kate was taken aback. 'You shouldn't talk like that,' she said reproachfully. 'After all, Leila is our sister.'

'You goose!' retorted Susanna. 'You can remain an old spinster till your dying day if you wish, but I know what I'm going to do.' And she turned from her sister and went away. She went straight to her youngest sister's room and said kindly, 'Don't you feel lonely here, all by yourself? Come along, let's go for a bit of a stroll in the garden.'

Leila jumped up gladly. 'I'd love to go for a stroll with you,' she said. 'And where is Kate?'

'She's asleep,' replied Susanna. She took her young sister's hand and led her off to the garden. After a while she said, 'You haven't been beyond the walls of our garden for ages, have you, little sister. Wouldn't you like to have a look at the forest?'

'I can't,' sighed Leila. 'You know Father forbade me to.'

'Just this once won't matter,' said Susanna. 'In a short while we'll be back and it is so lovely in the forest.'

The young sister allowed herself to be persuaded and she followed her sister into the forest. Susanna told her gay stories as they went along, but when they reached a deep, steep-sided ravine, Susanna stopped.

'You see that steep slope?' she asked. 'If someone were to fall down there he would surely be killed.' And while saying this, she grabbed her sister's arm and gave her a hard shove. Leila fell over the edge of the ravine. During her fall, however, she managed to catch hold of a branch of a juniper bush which had grown out of a crack in the rock.

'Help, help!' cried Leila. It never occurred to her that her sister had pushed her over on purpose. 'Help me, sister, help!' she cried, stretching out her arm towards her, while holding on firmly to the juniper bush with the other.

'I'll help you,' shouted Susanna angrily, seeing that her villainous deed had not succeeded the way she intended. 'I'll help you, but not the way you expect.' She tore off a long branch and handed it down to the unfortunate one below. But when Leila tried to catch hold of it, she gave her a hard blow with it on the arm. Leila cried out in pain, the branch of the juniper broke and the girl fell . . . down . . . down . . . down.

'And now stay there!' cried Susanna with satisfaction. She returned home, and when her father asked in the evening where his youngest daughter was, Susanna said that she

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probably had a headache and had gone to lie down. But in the morning, when Leila didn't even appear for breakfast, the baron sent a servant to her room. He returned with the news that the girl's room was empty. They began searching for her, and it seemed as though Leila had disappeared from the face of the earth. The baron had it proclaimed throughout the region, that whoever would bring back his daughter would be richly rewarded. Many people, tempted by the reward, travelled the country far and wide, but it occurred to no one to look for the lost one in the neighbouring forest.

Susanna said nothing to Kate about what she had done, yet Kate guessed the way things stood. And as she was afraid of her sister, she didn't tell her father what she thought.

Beautiful Leila lay dead at the bottom of the ravine. Susanna had not been mistaken when she reckoned that they would not find her there. The hand of the dead girl still grasped the juniper branch which Leila had torn off in her fall. In the damp ravine the body disappeared from view. In the autumn it was covered with leaves that fell from the trees growing up the sides of the ravine. In the spring the overflowing streams flooded the body and covered it with sand and mud. Now and then the wind broke off a bit of the rock, which would roll down. By the time a year had passed no one would have found any trace of Leila, even if they had climbed down to the bottom of the ravine.

But the branch of the juniper did not die. It took root and grew right up high into the sunshine, and so fast, that in two years' time the top had reached the very upper edge of the ravine. It became a splendid, tall tree. Its crown gave out a sweet smell, and whenever the wind swayed its branches, they made strange, taut sounds, resembling the wailing of a violin.

Lavuta, the gypsy shepherd on the baron's estates, fell in love with this tree. He loved to sit under it by the edge of the ravine, looking down into the depths and listening to the mysterious humming in the crown of the juniper.

Lavuta had a violin — a wretched old fiddle that hardly seemed to hold together. But how he could play it! Indeed, Lavuta succeeded in enticing such beautiful melodies out of his old fiddle, that people passing by thought it was the very spirit of the forest singing. One day, as he was sitting by the edge of the ravine playing, his bow broke. He chucked his fiddle down in anger, and it slithered and fell into the ravine.

Lavuta burst into tears. The fiddle was his one delight. What would he do without it? He would never be able to afford another. He wept and wept, till he fell asleep with exhaustion. And then he had a strange dream. First it seemed that the soft humming of the juniper tree was transformed into lovely music. It sounded like the strains of a violin playing.

'That must be my violin!' said the shepherd in his dream, and it seemed odd to him

that the violin could play itself. He listened to the music, and after a while he thought he also heard singing. In fact he began to understand the words. It was a gypsy song:

'Le tu e lavuta,
zabashav pre lavuta,
bo man chala, e dendvali,
bári raní . . .'

Lavuta understood the words of the song; and the lovely woman's voice was saying, 'Take a violin and play it! Play the story that a big-toothed woman killed me . . . !' It was an urgent request. But how could he play, if his violin lay there at the bottom of the ravine? Suddenly, as if in answer to his thoughts, a voice sounded from the depths of the ravine, 'Cut the top of the juniper tree and from it make yourself a new violin!'

At that moment the shepherd woke up. He rubbed his eyes and pondered a while about what he had dreamt. But then he said to himself, 'Well, well, it was only a dream . . .'

and as it was already evening, he gathered in his sheep and went home. But that night he just couldn't fall asleep at all. The gypsy song kept running in his ears.

Finally, towards morning, Lavuta did at last drop off, and again he had such a peculiar dream. He dreamt that a beautiful girl entered his barren room behind the horses' stables. In her hand she held a violin. She gave it to him and begged him in gypsy language to take the violin and play it to her. Then she said that if he would hit the table with it and break it, a lovely girl would become his faithful wife.

At dawn, as soon as Lavuta woke, he hastened to the ravine. Over his shoulder he carried a saw. He sawed off the top of the juniper tree and carried it home. Then he took a sharp knife and began carving a new violin from the juniper wood. He himself was amazed how quickly he worked. By evening the violin was finished. Then he asked the

baron's cook for some sheep's guts and he made violin strings out of them. He plucked hairs from the tails of the baron's horses and made himself a bow. And now the fiddle was ready. Lavuta placed it under his chin and touched the strings with the bow and immediately the fiddle began to sing of its own accord:

'Le tu a lavuta . . .'

The groom ran up in astonishment, 'Who was that playing and singing? Was it you, Lavuta?'

'No, not me — it was my new violin. It really plays of its own accord and sings as well.' Lavuta put the bow away and the violin went on singing.

'What is it singing?' asked the groom.

'Some woman or other is singing in gypsy language that she was killed by the big-oothed one,' explained the shepherd.

'The big-toothed one?' queried the groom. 'You know, my lad, it's a very strange violin. You ought to go to the old baron and tell him to listen to the song. He'll understand it, they say his wife was a gypsy . . .'

The groom took Lavuta to the old baron. 'This gypsy lad,' he said, 'has an amazing violin. It plays and sings completely of its own accord. Listen to it, sir . . . !'

Lavuta placed the violin under his chin and the lovely woman's voice immediately began singing: 'Le tu a lavuta . . .'

The baron sprang up. 'That's the voice of my youngest daughter,' he cried. 'Where is she?' He looked round but there was no sign of Leila. And yet her voice kept on singing.

'The big-toothed one!' cried the baron. 'Now I understand. Now I know who killed my Leila.' And he ran from the room, straight to his eldest daughter.

'Admit it, you killed your sister Leila!' he shouted. Susanna went pale, but pulled herself together. 'So that stupid goose Kate has been telling you stories, has she?' she said scornfully.

'She knows about it too, does she?' cried the baron. 'Oh, what daughters I have got! Out of my sight instantly! — both of you. Keep out of my sight, or I'll have you driven away by the servants.' And he turned on his heel and angrily left Susanna's room.

Susanna ran to her sister. 'What have you been telling Father?' she cried wrathfully. 'How do you know what happened to Leila? I never told anyone that I threw her into the ravine.'

'So it was you that did it?' said Kate with a shudder. 'I had an idea that it was you who got rid of her, but I never told Father or any of the servants.'

'Who can have told him then?' fumed Susanna. 'Now we're done for. He has banished us both.'

'Banished us?' wailed Kate. 'Whatever shall we do?'

'We won't perish,' retorted Susanna angrily. 'We'll take our clothes and jewels with us and you must persuade Father at least to give us each a dowry.'

So the sisters went to their father, and Kate begged him on her knees weepingly, 'Father, don't drive us from home as beggars! We're unhappy enough because of our ugliness. What can we hope to do in the world? Be merciful and at least give us each a dowry!'

The baron frowned. 'You won't get a farthing, either of you, and you can take only the bare necessities with you, otherwise I'll set the servants on you and have you whipped.'

Meanwhile Lavuta had returned to his little room behind the stables. The fiddle was lying beside him, and he was thinking about what the groom had just been telling him about the baron's youngest daughter . . . Perhaps she had been the girl who had appeared to him in his dream? She had been so lovely. And she had promised him that if he were to slam the violin down on the table and break it, she would become his faithful wife . . . He hesitated a while. Should he break his new violin, which played and sang so beautifully all of its own? Finally he made up his mind. He stood up, took hold of the violin and slammed it down on the table with all his might. It broke into a thousand fragments. But what of that? At that moment the beautiful girl he had seen in his dream stood before him. In her hand she held his old violin. Lavuta recognised it at once. But how it had changed! It had been polished up, its wood shone like a mirror, it had new, silken strings, and the bow which the girl handed him with the violin was not broken at all — it was a completely new one.

'Here's your violin, Lavuta. Take it!' said the girl kindly. 'I brought it back for you from the ravine, where I lay two years in a grave. My mother was a gypsy — she was acquainted with magic. Father fell in love with her for her beauty. But one of the powerful spirits, Orias, who served Mother, chose to have his revenge on her for marrying a mortal, so he cast a spell on her, that all her children would be wicked and ugly. After the birth of my two sisters, Mother begged Orias to release her from the spell. He promised to, but only on condition that Mother would die and become his companion in the world of the spirits if she had another child. Thus my life was bought by my mother's death. When my eldest sister threw me into the ravine, my mother's spirit was transformed into the juniper bush which I caught hold of in my fall. When my wicked sister then gave me the blow on my arm, the branch of the bush — my mother's protective arm — fell with me. Down in the ravine it took root and grew into a big tall tree. Thus I grew out of her body a second time. I could only take on human form again if some human being would transform the wood from my tree into something he would love above all else. And that was the way you loved your violin, Lavuta. When it fell into the ravine I knew that only

you could put life back into the dead wood of my juniper. That was why I appeared to you in a dream and begged you to do it . . .'

Lavuta looked at the girl as though stunned. Then he said, 'I gave you back life and you have given me back my violin. Now we're even.'

'No,' smiled the girl, 'for you've forgotten what I promised you. Play the song which the juniper violin played!'

Lavuta placed the violin under his chin and began playing the gypsy melody. How he trembled when he heard its sound. No one had ever had such a violin in all the world. The shepherd closed his eyes and played . . .

Suddenly in the midst of the song, the doors opened. In came the baron. He saw the girl and cried out, 'Surely that's my Leila!'

'Yes, it's me, Father,' she replied, and threw herself into her father's arms.

'So it wasn't true, what the shepherd's violin sang?' cried the baron, delighted. 'You're alive and Susanna didn't kill you?'

'She tried to,' replied Leila. 'She threw me from the rock, but Lavuta gave me back my life again. In return I promised him I would be his wife.'

'Of course, marry him!' said the baron. 'Marry whom you wish, as long as you are alive and well again.'

Shortly afterwards all three emerged from the hut and saw the two sisters leaving their baronial home. They were leaving, just as their father had ordered. When the eldest saw Leila she let out a terrible cry and fell to the ground. The other stood there as though petrified. Leila ran to her sister, bent over her and tried to bring her round. At that moment a stranger, looking like a servant, happened to walk past. He was limping with one leg.

'Pick up that woman and throw her out of my house,' ordered the baron. 'The second will go with her.'

'No!' begged Leila. 'Kate was not responsible for anything, she knew nothing about Susanna's evil deed. In fact neither of them can help it that they were born ugly — that was all because of the spell. Please forgive them!' She begged him so earnestly, that finally the baron gave in to her wishes and he ordered the servant to carry the fainting Susanna home. But the moment the limping fellow picked her up in his arms and lifted her, the ground opened beneath his feet and swallowed both him and his burden.

'That surely must have been the devil himself!' cried the baron. 'And he has carried Susanna straight off to Hell!'

Kate shivered with horror. She fell on her knees to Leila and begged her sister to forgive her.

Leila took her hand, lifted her up and said, 'I am not angry with you, sister. Come,

we'll all live together happily now. If you don't get married, you can help look after our children.'

The baron arranged a splendid wedding for his youngest daughter. And Lavuta was no longer a poor shepherd. Not, however, because he had married a rich bride, but because he became famous throughout the world as a great musician. He made much money from playing his wonderful violin, and so they were able to bring up and look after lots and lots of lovely children.

And squinting Kate really became much nicer, too. The odd thing was, that the nicer and better she was, the less ugly she seemed to be. In the end she even found herself a husband, too, and then they all lived happily ever after.

Kondas and Juhas

It all happened a long, long time ago, but even to this day the gypsies still retell this tale. The gypsy homeland was bountiful and rich. On being expelled from it, the gypsies roamed over mountains and valleys, crossed rivers and even seas. They went in two groups. One group flooded over the tops of the mountains to the grassy lands to the West — those were the shepherds. They knew how to look after horses and had their own herds. The others chose the easier route along the sea shores. The people of this tribe were mostly small in posture and earned their living by playing music. Their women danced beautifully.

The travels of the two tribes lasted a long time — several centuries, in fact — and as both streams were slowly making their way westwards, it so happened that one day the two tribes met. Their leaders greeted one another and discovered that oddly enough they understood one another, even though their languages already differred in many ways. They pitched a common camp, made a fire and held a festive party after the evening meal. Each wished to show the other tribe what they could do best. The shepherds rode their horses and threw lassoes. The musicians played their instruments and their women danced.

And it happened that one of those who was best at horse riding and throwing lassoes caught the beautiful eyes of one of the most enchanting dancers. They both knew that in a few hours they would have to separate from one another forever, for neither of them would be allowed to leave his own tribe. That was the law, and its disobeyal meant certain death. But to these two death seemed easier than separation. So they decided to run away together.

For two years they roamed the world. During the first year a child was born to them, and then came a second. But not long afterwards they reached a part of the world where a terrible illness raged. The man caught the disease and died, so the woman wandered on alone with her two children, not realising that she herself was also infected with it. Not far from a village she herself collapsed and died. So when the villagers found the children, they buried her body and had no alternative but to take charge of the two orphans. The richest farmer in the village, whose own child had also just died, adopted the gypsy orphans as his own. They were both boys. The farmer had two daughters, about the same age

as the two foundlings. His wife was a good woman, but she, too, died soon afterwards. Following her death the orphans had a hard time of it on the farm. They had to look after the animals. The elder one, called Kondas, had care of the pigs; the younger, Juhas, had charge of the sheep.

Kondas was big and strong for his age. He looked after his pigs well — never lost a single piglet — and so the farmer bought him a large whip, of which the lad was very proud. No one in the neighbourhood could crack a whip the way he could and flick such figures of eight from its long lash.

Juhas, though only a year younger than his brother, looked very small beside him. And he didn't resemble him much either. Kondas was strong and courageous, Juhas was weak and timid. The little shepherd's favourite object was a small pipe he had made for himself out of willow, and he had taught himself to play it. He could play any tune on his pipe the moment he had heard it once.

The farmer's daughters might not have been sisters either. The elder one, Draga, was a thorough dragon. She bullied the two orphans whenever she could, and would go for Juhas especially. The poor little chap was as afraid of her as of fire, but she didn't

dare go for Kondas, because she feared his whip. Young Marika, however, was kind. She would often slip a bit of extra food to the hungry shepherd boys, without her father or sister knowing. And in the evenings she loved to hear little Juhas playing his pipe.

Kondas and Juhas were never far apart. Kondas herded his pigs down in the valley, while Juhas would pasture his sheep up on the side of the hill. All day long Juhas would hear the cracking of Kondas' whip and Kondas would hear Juhas' pipe. At dusk they would make their way home together.

One day, when Kondas was counting his pigs he found that one of them was missing. He was very surprised and called Juhas. At that moment Juhas had also been counting his sheep and he had discovered that one of the lambs was missing too. They both counted again, but to no avail — there was no change in the numbers. Juhas broke into tears. 'What shall we do now?' he sobbed. 'The farmer will be sure to beat us . . .'

'We don't have to go home yet,' comforted Kondas. 'No one can have taken the animals but a wolf. Come on, let's see whether we can find its tracks.'

They hunted and hunted and in the end they really did find the wolf's track. It led to the forest.

'We can't return home until we've traced the thief to its den,' cried Kondas. 'If we find it and tell the farmer about it, he won't beat us, for a wolfskin is valuable.' So the two shepherd boys entrusted their herds to their collie dog Dragotin and followed the wolf track into the forest. It led on and on, and suddenly they realised it was getting dark and that, what's more, the tracks had completely come to an end.

'Let's go back,' said Juhas timidly, but Kondas cracked his whip and said, 'I'm not going back till I've seen that wolf.'

Suddenly they saw a small building ahead of them.

'Probably some hermit or other lives here,' suggested Kondas. 'Let's go in. Perhaps he'll give us a bed for the night. It's late already.'

The lads went up to the hut and knocked on the door. No one answered. They opened it and found themselves on the threshold of a small room with a low roof. It was warm there, and the glow came from the stove in the corner. But there was no one in the room.

'Whoever lives here,' said Kondas, 'is certainly not far away, because the fire's lit . . .'

The lads went in and shut the door behind them, so that the warmth would not escape. Then they examined the place, but it was rather dark in the room and they couldn't see much. There was just a wooden table, a stool, and a shelf on the wall for crockery. After a while Kondas realised that something was hanging on the door. He looked closer and saw the carcass of a lamb. It was hanging from a peg, and had been skinned.

'Why, isn't this the lamb you lost, Juhas?' said Kondas, 'I'll beat that beast to death, just see if I don't.'

'Perhaps it wasn't a wolf that robbed us,' suggested Juhas timidly.

'The track we followed here was certainly that of a wolf,' insisted Kondas. 'It led us here but . . . I can't make it out . . .'

'There's a good smell here,' said Juhas, and he went cautiously over to the stove and opened the oven. Yes, there on the baking dish lay a young pig roasting and almost ready.

'And I think,' whispered Juhas, 'that this is your lost piglet, Kondas.' His brother nodded. For a moment the lads looked helplessly at the roast. Their mouths watered, they were so hungry. Finally Kondas said, 'It wasn't a wolf that stole our animals, but the person who lives in this cottage. It's our pork that is roasting, so we can eat it.'

'I'd rather get away from here,' said Juhas, 'A person who steals is wicked. He might return any minute and do us harm.'

'I've got my whip,' said Kondas. 'I'm not afraid of anyone. Let's wait for him; he must repay us for the animals.' But Juhas begged him to be more careful and suggested they find out what the thief looked like, so that they could defend themselves. In the end Kondas admitted that this would be more sensible, and they began looking round for somewhere to hide. They discovered a trap door in the roof leading to the loft. There

was a ladder leading up to it. So they climbed up and hid under the eaves. In the trap door there was also a crack through which they could watch what was happening down below. Soon afterwards, the door of the cottage opened and to the lads' astonishment in came some sort of beast. A wolf! But suddenly it shook itself, and in its place stood a woman! A young and pretty woman! She opened the stove and added some more firewood. Then she went to the shelf, took down a candle and lit it. The lads upstairs were atremble with fear. Surely it must be a witch, if she could transform herself into the shape of a wolf.

The woman placed the candle on the table, then she went over to the stove and opened the oven. She took out the roast and carried it on its roasting dish back to the table. Then she started eating. She tore the meat to pieces with her hands and placed several large chunks in her mouth at a time. The smell of the roast penetrated up through the crack in the ceiling to the boys' nostrils and made their mouths water again. And their hearts were beating fast . . .

Suddenly the woman threw a gnawed bone on the floor and, looking up, called out loudly, 'You two up there! Come on down!'

The lads were so taken aback, that their blood froze in their veins. They pressed close to one another, but didn't move.

'Don't be afraid!' said the woman calmly. 'I won't harm you. On the contrary, I want to give you some of my supper.' The brothers didn't believe her, but there was nothing they could do, but obey her. So they climbed down — Kondas first, grasping his whip in his hand, Juhas behind him, completely terrified.

'Put that whip down, lad,' said the woman gently. 'It's not polite for a guest to have such a thing.' But Kondas didn't obey her; he only gripped the whip even more firmly. Whereupon the woman smiled, waved her hand ever so slightly and the whip flew out of Kondas' hand and fell in the far corner of the room.

'It will be better for you to do as I tell you,' she advised them. 'Now come to the table and eat! You can eat everything that's left; I've had enough.'

'And anyway, it's the pig which you took from our herd,' said Kondas, who, in spite of losing his whip, had not quite lost all his courage. 'And that's our lamb hanging from the door, too.'

The woman smiled again. 'Quite right,' she said calmly. 'A she-wolf stole them from you and I am that she-wolf. But I am sorry you traced me here to my cottage. I wouldn't like anyone else to know about it, except you two. You must promise me that you will never tell anyone what you've seen, or I'll not let you go from here.'

What could the lads do? There's no joking with a witch that can change from the form of a wolf to that of a human. So they promised what she asked.

'I fully believe you will keep your word,' said the woman. 'I see you are a couple of

good lads and I shall be glad to reward you for your silence. In remembrance of this I'll give each of you a nice present. But first tell me what objects each of you possesses and loves best in the world.'

'Well, we don't own anything very much,' answered Kondas, 'but of the few things which are really mine, my favourite is my whip.'

'Very well,' said the enchantress. 'From this moment on your whip will have magic power. If you crack it and say "Halt!" the person who has not been wanting to obey you will be as though frozen to the ground and will not be able to move until you crack the whip again and say "Enough!" And what object do you love most?' she asked Juhas.

'My pipe' whispered Juhas.

'Then from now on,' said the enchantress, 'if you blow your pipe, anyone who has not wished to obey you, will have to fulfil your wishes, so far as it is in his powers. But be careful! These two things will only be of benefit to you as long as you use them wisely and within reason, and only when you are in need. You must not misuse them, and woebetide you if you try to harm anyone innocent or use your powers lightheartedly at the expense of others! In that case your whip and your pipe will lose their magic powers. And something else: in the morning, just before dawn, you must leave this place. As soon as the first sun's rays shine into the room, I become a she-wolf, and in that form I behave in a way that is far from human. If I were to find you when I am like a wolf, I would tear you to pieces and eat you. Do you understand?'

The brothers nodded and promised that they would do as she had advised. The woman then lay down on the ground by the stove, and the lads stretched out by the door.

Kondas was the first to wake in the morning. Through the window he saw that it was still dark, but the birds were beginning to wake, too, and he could hear their chirruping. So it would be dawn any minute now. He hastily roused his brother and softly, so that they would not rouse the sleeping woman, the lads crept from the cottage. It took them a long time to get out of the forest, but at last they saw their village in front of them.

The farmer had just sat down to dinner, when looking out of the window he saw the two shepherds coming into the farmyard. He shouted out angrily, jumped up from the table and ran out, undoing his belt as he ran. 'I'll teach you, you good-for-nothings!' he cried. 'I'll beat that roaming gypsy blood out of you both!' His elder daughter, on hearing this, ran out behind him and laughed gleefully to herself. But little Marika, who had also heard her father threatening the shepherd boys, ran away to her own room. She was sorry for the boys.

The farmer ran up to the brothers and raised his belt for a blow. Kondas, however, hastily cracked his whip and cried, 'Halt!' At that moment the farmer seemed to have been

turned to stone. The arm with the belt stiffened, and his legs seemed to have become fixed to the ground. He couldn't move an inch. He could only speak.

'What's this?' he shouted, twitching. 'What has happened to me?'

'I'll cure you of it, sir,' said Kondas, 'if you will promise you won't beat us.'

'What sort of gypsy hocus-pocus is this?' cried the farmer. 'I won't promise you anything. I'll beat you so you'll never forget it till you die.'

'Then you can stand like that till you die yourself,' replied Kondas calmly. He took Juhas by the hand and turned, as if to leave. But suddenly the farmer took fright and began shouting, 'Come back! I'll never beat you again. I promise you . . .'

Kondas turned back. 'The same thing will happen to you again any time you try to punish us unfairly,' he said. He raised the whip once more, cracked it and said, 'Enough!' At that moment the farmer could start moving again. As soon as he realised this, however, he hurled himself on Kondas and wanted to snatch his whip from his hand. But at that instant Juhas pulled his pipe from his pocket, put it to his mouth and started piping. The farmer's arm, the one with which he had wanted to beat Kondas again, once more dropped helplessly to his side. What was happening to him? He felt his heart softening strangely in his breast . . . Tears were coming to his eyes . . . Suddenly he felt compassion for these skinny, ragged little orphans. The tears poured from his eyes . . .

'Father, what is the matter with you?' cried Draga, who had been watching it all, but had understood nothing.

'I'll never, never beat you two again, you poor drovers,' sobbed the farmer. 'Come on in, sit down at my table and take your fill.'

The brothers went into the farmer's room, where the table was laid for dinner, with plates of meat and potatoes. They ate to their hearts' content, and the farmer, who was usually miserly, kept offering them more, saying there was plenty of food on the farm.

Draga ran to her father saying, 'Have you gone mad, Father? Why are you spoiling these gypsy wretches? You've been bewitched.'

'I'm sorry for them,' said the farmer, stroking the lads' curly heads.

But when the boys went off after dinner and the farmer was left alone with his daughter, he slowly found his old nature returning. He began admitting that his daughter was right, and together, he and Draga discussed what had happened. At last she said, 'Kondas' whip and Juhas' pipe are bewitched. We must take these two things from them, otherwise the two drovers will be able to do what they like with us, and they will finally take the farm from us.'

The farmer agreed, and Draga went on, 'We shall not get anything out of them unless we use cunning. I'll cheat Kondas of his whip and Marika must take charge of Juhas and his pipe.'

They summoned Marika, and Draga explained her plan: Draga would be sweet to Kondas and persuade him to lend her his whip, at least for a moment. As soon as that happened, Draga would crack the whip and drive him from the farm. While she was doing this, Marika would have to persuade Juhas in a similar way to lend her his pipe. As soon as they had these objects, it would be easy to get rid of the two orphans.

Marika was shocked by the idea, but as she was afraid of her sister, she preferred to hold her peace.

Draga was beautiful to look at. She had black hair, a fine figure and dark eyes that were like dangerous deep pools. Marika was smaller, but on the other hand she had lovely, honest eyes, which were beautiful to look into.

The next day Draga filled a basket with meats and cakes and set off to find Kondas in the pastures. She sat down beside him, pulled out the food and invited him to join her. Kondas was only too delighted. Draga gave him the best bits of everything and cheerfully chatted away, 'You know, Kondas, I like you best of all the lads in the village.'

Kondas knew only too well that Draga was making a fool of him. He knew her too well to think that she seriously meant what she was saying. He didn't answer and just went on eating.

'You don't believe me?' asked Draga, taking his hand in hers. 'I like you, and if you and Father would agree — I would be willing to marry you.'

Kondas transferred the whip from the hand Draga was holding to the other one. Then he said calmly, 'What sort of fool do you take me for? Do you think that if you bring me food you are entitled to make fun of me?'

'But Kondas, my darling, what are you saying?' said Draga, fawning like a cat. 'I mean it quite seriously . . . Do lend me that lovely whip of yours a moment, I would love to try and crack it the way you do.'

'No one in the whole region can do that,' laughed Kondas proudly.

'Oh, please do,' begged Draga. Suddenly, as if for a joke, she leaned over him, grasped the handle of the whip and tore it out of his hand. She sprang up like a weasel and laughed victoriously. She waved her arm and tried to crack the whip, but it was far too long and its thong just wound round her wrist. She struggled with it, but Kondas had jumped up too, and he in his turn now tore the whip from her hand and said angrily, 'Go home and never come visiting me in the pastures again! Now I know why you brought me all that food. Clear off! I'll never speak another word with you!'

Meanwhile Marika and Juhas had been sitting together on the slope of the hill, where the flock of sheep was pasturing. Juhas was enjoying the food which the young girl had brought him. It was not the first time the farmer's daughter had come and joined him in

the pastures and brought him something tasty. They chatted for a while and then Marika said, 'Juhas, do you like me just a little?'

'But you know I love you more than anyone else in the world except Kondas,' said the little shepherd sincerely.

'Would you lend me your pipe, if I were to ask you for it?' Marika asked him.

Juhas pondered a moment. Then he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the pipe. 'It's the only thing in the world that really belongs to me and of which I am really fond,' he said, 'but if you like it — take it. I'll give it to you.'

Whereupon Marika began weeping. In vain Juhas asked her what was the matter. She just wept and wept. At last she wiped her eyes and said, 'I would never take what you love most away from you, Juhas. Keep you pipe! I only wanted to know what you would say. I know your pipe has magic power and that you need it more than I and more than anyone else.'

'How do you know?' asked Juhas.

'My father and sister say so,' said Marika.

'They're right,' nodded Juhas. And he began telling the young girl how he and his brother had tracked the wolf, how they had found the cottage in the wood and how the enchantress had bewitched the whip and the pipe. When he had finished, Marika was silent a moment and then said, 'Now you needn't herd the sheep any more, Juhas. If the sound of your pipe can really persuade someone to do as you wish, try it on my father. Go to him and ask him for my hand in marriage!'

'If that is what you would like, I'll do so at once,' cried Juhas delightedly, and he sprang up. Together they ran to the house.

Meanwhile Draga, humiliated, had already reached the farm and, trembling all over with rage, she said to her father, 'I've spoilt everything! I wonder how it worked out with Marika and Juhas . . .' She had hardly finished speaking, when Marika and Juhas came into the room. They were holding hands and Juhas said, 'I'm not going to herd the sheep any longer, sir. Marika and I are fond of one another and we want to get married. You'll give her to me, won't you?' The farmer turned red with rage, but before he could answer, Juhas had pulled out his pipe and begun piping. What enchanting tones! The farmer's heart softened, tears came to his eyes, he took Juhas by the hand and said, 'I'll give her to you, of course, Juhas. Get married my children, and be happy!'

'What are you saying?' cried out Draga. At that moment the door opened and in came Kondas.

'I'm not going to herd your pigs any longer, sir,' he said, frowning. 'I'm going to seek my luck elsewhere in the world and find some other work. I'm sure my brother will come with me,' he said, turning to Juhas.

'You can't leave us now,' said the farmer kindly, 'for Juhas has just asked for Marika's hand, and I've consented to their marriage.'

'You're bewitched,' shrieked Draga. But no one took any notice of her.

'Marika and I want to get married, because we've been fond of one another since our childhood,' Juhas explained to his brother.

'Well then — I'll go alone,' said Kondas sadly.

'Get out, both of you!' shouted Draga, beside herself with rage. 'And you too!' she said, turning to her sister. 'You'll go too, if you really want to marry this dirty gypsy shepherd boy.'

'I am going to marry him,' replied Marika.

'I wouldn't, even if I were a she-wolf,' said Draga scornfully. But she had hardly said the words, when a long, drawn-out wolf's howl was to be heard outside. They were all taken aback and looked towards the window, which seemed to have suddenly grown darker. It was wide open and on the sill stood a wolf! The great big beast sprang into the room.

'I am a she-wolf and I'll marry Kondas, if he wishes,' it said in a human voice. Kondas knew that it was that forest enchantress, who had bewitched his whip and Juhas' pipe.

'Will you marry me, Kondas?' asked the she-wolf in a sincere voice. Whereupon Kondas, angered by Draga's evil words and unhappy that his brother didn't want to go away with him, nodded his head hard. 'I will,' he cried. The she-wolf stood up on its hind legs, placed its front paws on Kondas' shoulders and said, 'Then kiss your bride-to-be, Kondas!'

The young drover trembled. Should he kiss a wolf's mouth? He hesitated . . .

'Are you afraid?' asked the beast sadly. It looked beseechingly into his eyes. It had beautiful eyes — full of inexpressible sorrow and sadness . . . It seemed to Kondas that they were even misted with tears. He felt how his fear and resistance were melting away. Suddenly he bent over and touched the wolf's mouth with his lips. It had hardly happened, when the she-wolf shook herself, the wolf's skin fell from her and in her place stood the beautiful enchantress from the forest hut. She embraced Kondas, kissed him and said, 'Thank you for delivering me. I am a gypsy queen. A powerful magician, whom I once offended, cast a spell on me and turned me into a she-wolf. I had to live in the forest and find food for myself like any other beast, but in the evenings I was allowed to change back into human form. That was how I was punished for being very wicked and cruel — like this girl —' she said, pointing to Draga. 'I can only be delivered from the spell if I can cast it on to someone who is just as evil as I was formerly . . .' The gypsy queen again looked searchingly at Draga.

The farmer's daughter was standing there as white as a sheet and trembling.

'You will now be a she-wolf in place of me,' said the girl severely. 'You will live in a wolf's body until you improve and find a man who will have the courage to kiss you in your beast's form.' She raised her arm and pointed to the wolf skin lying on the ground. At that moment Draga disappeared and a live she-wolf stood in her place. Before they could recover from their astonishment, the beast howled pitifully, sprang out through the open window — and was gone.

Now the girl turned to the two brothers, 'Come with me, Kondas and Juhas,' she said kindly. 'I'll lead you to where you belong — among your own people, the gypsies. Your father and mother were both children of the leaders of two gypsy tribes. You are their legitimate successors, and you will be the leaders of our tribe.'

'And Marika?' asked Juhas softly.

'Take her with you as your wife,' answered the girl, smiling. Juhas looked at Marika and she nodded. He took her hand and they left the room, followed by Kondas and his beautiful bride.

Yaghvali

There was once a king who had an only son whom he loved so dearly that, when the time came for the prince to choose a bride, he told him to listen only to the dictates of his heart. So far, however, the prince had not been specially fond of any particular girl. He enjoyed having fun and dancing with all of them, but hunting was really his favourite occupation.

The king was already growing old and he was afraid he might die before he would have a grandchild. So he thought he would hold a ball and invite the most beautiful girls of the whole kingdom to it, regardless of their positions in life or their fortunes. And since every girl who was young and beautiful had a right to come to the ball, a certain Jezibaba got it into her head that she would marry off her daughter to the prince. She dressed her up very splendidly and by magic of various kinds transformed her into such a beauty, that it was not likely anyone one else would compare with her.

The very day the ball was to take place, the prince set off early in the morning to hunt. He rode alone and came to a water well, where he got off his horse to have a drink. Suddenly, between the trees, he saw a clearing and on it some carts with canvas coverings. A gypsy camp, it seemed. At that moment a young gypsy girl with a jug in her hand stepped down from one of the carts and came towards the well. The prince hid behind a tree, so as not to be seen. When she reached it, he stepped out from his hiding place and greeted her, noticing that she was very beautiful.

'What is your name?' he asked her.

'Yaghvali,' she whispered.

'Yaghvali . . . ?' repeated the prince. It seemed a strange name to him. 'What does it mean?'

'In your language,' replied the gypsy girl, 'it means "the striking one".'

'Your name suits you well,' smiled the prince. 'Do you like dancing, Yaghvali?'

'Very much, sir.'

'Then come to the royal castle this evening, there will be a ball and we will dance together,' said the prince. But the gypsy girl just shook her head.

'How can I go to a ball in these old clothes? And I haven't any others . . .'

'I'll send you an invitation and a ball dress,' offered the prince.

'But no — I really can't,' sighed the girl.

'Why not?' the prince was getting impatient.

'I have two elder sisters. I can't leave them at home and go out dancing alone. I should feel so sorry for them.'

'Are your sisters good-looking?' asked the prince. 'How old are they and what are their names?'

'The eldest, Medini, is eighteen, Damajanti is sixteen,' replied Yaghvali. 'And they are both more beautiful than I.'

'I don't believe it,' said the prince. 'No one in the world could be more beautiful than you! I'll send you three invitations and three ball dresses. Will you come with your sisters, then?'

Yaghvali promised that she would.

As soon as the prince arrived home, he ordered his servants to take three beautiful ball dresses and three invitations to the gypsy camp. Impatiently he waited for the evening. But the ball began and there was no sign of the gypsies. The prince didn't dance, he just stood watching the doorway . . .

'Just look!' whispered the king. 'Look at that dancer over there, she's far the most beautiful of the lot.' He pointed to the Jezibaba's daughter, who was just dancing past in a splendid silver dress. At that moment the door of the hall opened and in came the three beautiful young gypsy girls. The eldest of them was wearing a pink dress, the middle one a beautiful pale blue one and the youngest, whom the prince recognised as lovely Yaghvali, was dressed in white. He immediately ran up to her, whirled the young girl off to the dance and never left her side the whole night through. In the morning he led her up to his father and said, 'This one will be my bride.' The king was not opposed to his choice; all he cared about was that the wedding should be as soon as possible.

On her return home, the Jezibaba's daughter was furious. She told her mother about the three lovely gypsy girls and blamed her for not making her more beautiful than them, especially Yaghvali, whom the prince wanted to marry.

'Just wait a while,' said the Jezibaba, 'I'll get my own back on her.'

On the day of the prince's wedding, crowds of people made their way to the castle to welcome the new queen. Many of them brought the bride wedding gifts and among them was the Jezibaba, dressed as a poor old woman. She brought Yaghvali just a rose, but such a beautiful one that the bride exclaimed in amazement when she saw it. And she pinned the rose to her bosom, to adorn her wedding dress.

After the ceremony in the church, when the prince turned to embrace his young wife, a thorn of the rose adorning Yaghvali's breast pierced her to the heart. The queen fell lifeless to the ground. In vain they tried to revive her, and in vain the prince called

her by the sweetest of names. In an instant the wedding festivities were transformed into deepest mourning.

The prince wouldn't allow the dead Yaghvali to be laid in the mortuary. He ordered that she be carried off to their bridal chamber in the castle. There he locked himself in and wouldn't admit a soul. Three days and three nights the prince stayed with his dead wife. When he finally emerged from the bridal chamber he looked an old man. His hair had gone white, and sorrow had lined his face with deep furrows. He ordered a beautiful chapel to be erected for the deceased one. There, on a catafalque, made to appear like a couch, Yaghvali lay dressed in her magnificent wedding dress and looked as though she was alive. It seemed as though she was not dead at all, only sleeping . . .

Each day the prince would go and see his wife in the chapel. He would sit for hours by her couch and weep bitter tears. The sisters of Yaghvali were also deeply distressed. When they were due to break camp, they begged the prince to be allowed to see her in the chapel and to take their leave of her. The prince agreed.

On the way to the chapel the young gypsies met the Jezibaba.

'Where are you going, my beauties?' she asked them.

'We're about to take leave of our sister, who married the king, but who died suddenly on her wedding day,' replied the eldest, Medini. 'We are leaving this camp now and we shall never see our Yaghvali again,' added Damajanti sadly.

'Why don't you find husbands in our region?' asked the Jezibaba. 'Then you wouldn't have to leave your sister and could visit her more often.'

'We're poor gypsies,' sighed Medini. 'Who would marry either of us?'

'I know of some husbands for you,' said the baba. 'They are great and powerful lords. The elder has six kingdoms and the younger three. They are looking for brides, possibly poor ones, but they must be very beautiful, and you certainly are that. Wouldn't you like to marry them?'

'I would, indeed,' burst out Medini.

'So would I,' cried Damajanti.

'Then come with me; I'll take you to your bridegrooms,' said the Jezibaba. The gypsy girls agreed, and they went with her.

The Jezibaba, however, led the girls to her own two sons, two monstrous giants. The elder had six heads and the younger three. They lived deep underground, where the six-headed one ruled six underground kingdoms, and Triple-Head ruled three. The six-headed one married Medini, the three-headed, Damajanti. From that moment on the two young gypsy girls disappeared from the face of the earth. When they didn't return to their camp, their people assumed that the girls had forsaken them, and they left without them.

Meanwhile, the prince proclaimed that he would never marry again. Every day he would go to the chapel where his dead wife lay, as beautiful as ever.

One day, on entering the chapel, the prince suddenly heard a child's cry. He looked round startled — but saw nothing. Then suddenly he noticed that something was glittering on the ground. He bent over — it was a golden apple. How had it got there? And again there was the sound of crying. He moved on and looked under the couch. There on the ground lay a naked child. A beautiful baby with golden curls. The child was crying, but when the prince took it in his arms, it stretched out its hand for the golden apple. He gave it to the baby, and immediately the child was quiet.

The prince carried the little boy home, entrusted him to the care of twelve servants, and ordered them to care for him like the apple of their eye. But he told no one where he had found the child. He was afraid of betraying a secret.

The child grew splendidly and was more and more like the prince every day. By the time he was a year old he was running about, and soon he began talking and was so bright

and clever, that everyone admired him. It was only the old king who didn't like the boy. Whenever he saw him playing with the golden apple, which was the boy's favourite toy, he would frown grimly.

They called the boy Yoko. When he was five the prince bought him a little pony for his birthday. Yoko soon learned to ride it and the prince would take him with him on his rides. He would also ride with him to the chapel to see his dead wife Yaghvali.

One day, when the prince and Yoko were returning from a ride, they met the old king. He frowned and said to his son, 'I don't like seeing you spend so much time with this alien child. Why don't you marry again and have one of your own?'

The prince was convinced that Yoko was his own child, but he didn't know how to explain this to his father. So he preferred to remain silent. The lad, however, looked undauntedly at the king and said, 'But I am his son and you, sir, are my grandfather.'

The king was very angry. 'Be off with you, you rude child!' he shouted at Yoko. 'Don't let me ever see you here again!'

'Where's he to go, Father?' asked the prince, dismayed. 'After all, he's very small as yet, and has no one in the world . . .'

'I'm big enough,' said Yoko calmly. 'I'm big enough to go off into the world and find the medicine that will bring my mother back to life. Goodbye, Father!' He spurred his pony and rode off. The prince wanted to ride after him, but the king held him back. 'Leave him,' he said, 'either he's cheekily lying or he's muddle-headed. How could you possibly be his father. And what mother is he talking about, anyway?'

Again the prince couldn't think of a way of explaining things to his Father, so he just mumbled something, and didn't dare oppose him. He thought perhaps that Yoko would soon be back. But he didn't come back at all. He just rode off on his pony into the world.

Little Yoko stopped at a blacksmith's, where a gypsy was working. The lad dismounted from his pony and watched the sparks fly when the hammer fell on the anvil.

'Blacksmith,' he said after a while, 'would you lend me that hammer?'

'Why, you couldn't even hold it, sonny,' laughed the blacksmith.

'Lend it to me and you'll see,' retorted Yoko. The gypsy laughingly handed him the heavy hammer, but to his amazement the boy grasped it and lifted it with ease. Then he swung the iron hammer in the air and threw it high into the sky. It flew so high, that it took quite a while before it fell to the ground again. When it did, however, it ploughed so deep into the earth that it furrowed out a cavity, the bottom of which was not to be seen.

'Thank you for helping me to find the way,' called Yoko. And before the amazed blacksmith had pulled himself together, the lad had jumped straight into the hollow. He disappeared into it — and immediately the ground began to close in behind him.

A moment later, there was not a sign either of him or of the hollow — or of the blacksmith's hammer, for that matter. The gypsy shook his head so hard, it's a wonder he didn't shake it right off. And then, when he finally did pull himself together, he first began to be sorry he had lost his hammer. Then he noticed the lad's pony, quietly grazing there as though nothing had happened, and he didn't feel so angry any more. It was a good horse, though perhaps a little small, and he could sell it and make himself a new hammer.

Meanwhile Yoko sank deeper and deeper into the ground . . . He didn't fall very fast, because he steadied himself by holding with his hands to the sides of the narrow tunnel through which he was falling. At last he felt firm ground beneath his feet. He looked round and saw that he had fallen through the hole down to a strange deserted country. There was not a thing to be seen, just bare rocks, and not a trace of grass or flowers growing anywhere. Above him, instead of sky, there was the arched black ceiling of the roof — the earth.

At Yoko's feet lay the hammer which had carved out the way to this underground world for him. The lad picked it up and set off along a stony track which led him, after a while, to a large grey house. When he drew near, he saw that the house had no windows and that its walls were of lead. He went up to the door and knocked on it with his hammer. The door was opened by a young sallow-skinned woman.

'Whoever are you and what are you doing here, my boy?' she asked in amazement.

'I'm from the world above and my name is Yoko,' replied the boy. 'My father is a king and my mother a gypsy.'

'I was originally a gypsy, too,' sighed the woman. 'But a Jezibaba married me off to her son, who reigns here over this melancholy kingdom, and over two others as well. I have been living in this underworld here for six years with my husband; he is hideous, has three heads and lives on lead.'

'What's your name?' asked Yoko.

'Damajanti,' answered the woman sadly. 'I have a sister who lives somewhere here under the ground with her husband too. He's even more horrifying to know, because he has six heads and rules six kingdoms. But since the time when the Jezibaba brought us here, I haven't seen my sister at all. I so long to . . .'

'Have you any relatives in the upper world?' asked Yoko.

'No, I've no one now, only my sister Medini,' replied Damajanti. 'We used to have a younger sister, who was called Yaghvali, but that same Jezibaba, who carried us off, poisoned her on her wedding day with a thorn from a rose.'

'Then you are my aunt,' cried Yoko joyfully. 'Yaghvali is my mother.'

'That's not possible, sonny,' said Damajanti, shaking her head. 'Our Yaghvali died the day of her wedding and she had no children.'

'All the same, she is my mother,' maintained Yoko. 'She's not dead, she's only asleep and I'm going to wake her. Will you help me?'

'How can I help you?' asked Damajanti.

'Let me into the house and hide me somewhere until your husband comes,' begged Yoko. The woman took his hand and led him inside. 'I've nothing to offer you, little nephew of mine,' she said, apologising. 'My husband only eats lead pellets. I can't eat them, so I live on herbs.'

'I can last a long time without food,' replied Yoko.

Suddenly from outside they heard a terrifying sound.

'That's my husband!' said the woman, taking fright. 'When he comes home, he always knocks on the door with his lead hammer.'

Only then did Yoko remember that he had left his iron hammer lying outside. Damajanti hid the boy, but the three-headed monster shouted out the moment he came inside, 'Who have you got here, woman? There was some sort of hammer lying outside the gate. Whose is it?'

'Mine!' shouted Yoko, and he came out of his hiding.

'How's that?' exclaimed the three-headed monster. 'A little tiddler like you could never lift such a heavy hammer. Who's with you? Out with it!'

'No one,' replied Yoko. 'If you don't believe that the hammer is mine, come outside and I'll show you whether I can lift it or not.'

'Very well,' roared the giant. He went outside with the lad, and Yoko picked up the hammer as though it were as light as a feather.

'Ho ho,' laughed Triple-head. 'So you're some sort of strong man, are you! Perhaps you're stronger than I?' and he roared with laughter.

'Do you want to find out?' asked Yoko. The giant shook with horrible mirth. He seized the lad by the waist, lifted him high into the air and flung him down to the ground with such force that Yoko ploughed into the earth up to his waist.

'Pull me out!' begged the lad, 'and I'll show you how strong I am . . .' This tickled the giant even more. So he pulled Yoko out of the ground with a jerk. The latter, the moment he was out of the hole, put his hand in his pocket, pulled out his golden apple and threw it from one hand to the other a few times. Then he went up to the giant. With his two small hands he grasped the giant's waist and lifted him right up into the air. Then he plunged him into the earth so hard that Triple-head stuck in the ground up to his waist. In vain he tried to scramble out. Yoko then seized the giant's lead hammer, and swish — one of the monster's three heads was off. Yoko swung it again, and swish — the second was gone.

'Don't kill me!' screamed the last head. 'I'll reward you richly, if you'll let me off!'

'We'll see about that,' said Yoko, 'but first tell me how I can get to your elder brother.'

'Take one of the lead pellets my wife has prepared for my supper, and throw it on the ground,' said Triple-head. 'The pellet will turn into a horse, which will take you to my elder brother.'

'That's what I wanted to know,' said Yoko. And he swung his arms for the third time — and that was the end of the giant's last head. Yoko turned to his aunt, who had been watching in amazement, and said, 'You are free now, but I can't take you back to Earth yet, I must free your sister Medini first. Get me one of the lead pellets which you prepared for Triple-head's supper!'

Damajanti went into the house and soon returned. She handed the lad a large piece of lead. Yoko threw it to the ground and in that instant a splendid grey horse stood before him.

'Come with me,' said Yoko to his aunt, 'you'll meet your sister.' Damajanti mounted the horse. Yoko picked up the lead hammer from the ground and sprang into the saddle behind her. The grey horse raced off as though even together they weighed less than a feather. It flew like the wind. And soon they stopped in front of a house made of silver.

Yoko led the horse behind some rocks and tethered it to a boulder. Then he returned to his aunt, who was waiting by the house. He raised the lead hammer and gave the silver door a sharp blow. A moment later the door was opened by another sallow-skinned woman.

'Medini!' cried Damajanti joyfully, and ran up to her sister to embrace her.

'Did your husband let you come and visit me?' asked Medini, delighted. 'And who is this boy?' she said, pointing to Yoko.

'That's our nephew, Yaghvali's son, and he's called Yoko,' explained Damajanti. 'He freed me by killing Triple-head, who would never have let me come and see you himself.'

'How was that possible?' asked Medini, amazed. 'You're so small!'

'I'll overcome your husband too, and then I'll take you both back to Earth,' said Yoko. 'But you must hide us somewhere, before Six-heads returns home.'

Medini let them both in, but the gate had hardly shut behind them, when they heard a terrible blow outside.

'That's him!' whispered Medini, frightened. 'He's back early today. Wherever shall I hide you?'

Again, Yoko remembered only too late that he had left the lead hammer lying outside the house. It doesn't matter, he thought to himself, Six-heads will think his brother is visiting him. But Medini had not had time to hide her visitors properly; the six-headed monster was already at the door. He looked even more ghastly than his younger brother,

for six long necks grew out of his mighty body and there was a monstrous head on each one of them.

'Where's my brother?' roared the monster, and it sounded like a whole troop of hoarse voices, because all six heads spoke at once. At that moment he also noticed Damajanti and the young lad. He waved an immense arm in which he grasped a vast silver hammer and spoke threateningly to the trembling Damajanti. 'Where's your husband? And who is this lad?'

'My husband — isn't here,' stuttered Damajanti, terrified.

'Your brother sent his wife here alone,' said Medini. 'This lad is a relative of theirs, who came to visit them. Triple-head will be here any minute now . . .'

'A relative! My brother's relatives are also my relatives,' shouted Six-heads. 'But you're lying, woman! Triple-head's lead hammer is lying outside the gate. My brother must be here somewhere.'

'But you can see for yourself that he isn't,' said Medini soothingly.

'Then how did this hammer get here?' roared the giant.

'Triple-head lent it to me, so that I should have a proof that I really am a relative of his,' said Yoko calmly. The giant laughed.

'You, you whippersnapper?' he cried. 'Why, you couldn't even lift a hammer that heavy if you tried.'

'Come outside and I'll show you how I can!' bragged Yoko.

'I'd like to see it,' muttered Six-heads. So he went out with Yoko — and sure enough! The lad picked up the heavy lead hammer quite easily.

'If you're such a strong fellow,' cried the giant, 'it's more likely you stole my brother's hammer; I'm sure he would never have lent it to you himself.' So saying, he bent down, picked the lad up by the waist, together with the hammer, and flung him to the ground with such force that Yoko plunged deep into the ground, right up to his waist. At the same time the hammer flew out of his hand and ploughed deep into the ground farther off.

'And now tell me! What happened to Triple-head?' roared the giant.

'All right, pull me out and I'll tell you,' answered Yoko.

Six-heads pulled him out, but the moment the lad was on the ground, he put his hand in his pocket and felt for his golden apple.

'Stop playing with that apple and tell me what's happened to my brother!' shouted the giant.

'This!' said Yoko. And he sprang at Six-heads, seized him round the waist and in that moment the giant was flying right into the air. When he landed, he plunged into the ground right up to his shoulders. In vain he tried to scramble out, but Yoko seized the silver hammer, which had fallen from the giant's hand as he fell, and he began cutting off the giant's ugly heads one by one. Six-heads screamed and howled horribly. When all he had left was his sixth head, he began begging for mercy, 'Don't cut off my last head, please! Spare my life! I'll reward you greatly, and you'll never regret it . . .'

'Perhaps I'll spare you,' said Yoko, 'if first of all you tell me how I can bring back to life my mother Yaghvali whom your mother, the Jezibaba, bewitched into deep sleep on the day of her wedding.'

'I'll tell you,' whined the giant. 'Not far from here lies Golden Mountain. On the slopes of that mountain there is a well and at the bottom of it sits a frog. It's my mother's mother, our grandmother. It has a blade of grass beneath its tongue. If you touch your sleeping mother with that blade of grass, she will come back to life.'

'That's all I wanted to know,' said Yoko contentedly. He swung his arms once more and Six-heads' last head rolled off. Then he turned to his aunts, who had meanwhile also come out of the house and watched everything.

'Wait here for me till I return. I must fetch that blade of grass,' said Yoko.

Medini showed him the way to the Golden Mountain, and when he reached it, he found the well at the foot of its slopes. He threw in a stone to find how deep it was, and it took a long time till he heard the splash. So he put his hand into his pocket to find his golden apple and began throwing it from hand to hand . . .

Suddenly he saw two enormous feet standing there in front of him. He looked up and saw a fellow there, as tall as a mountain.

'You'd like to get into that well, Yoko, wouldn't you?' said the fellow kindly. 'Why all the trouble? I can climb in and get you the blade you need. In any case, I've got an old bone to pick with that frog down there . . .'

'Who are you?' asked Yoko.

'I am Orias,' laughed the giant. 'I took up your cause because the Jezibaba, who bewitched your mother, is my greatest enemy. When you were born, I gave you that golden apple so that you could summon me whenever you needed help. I knew that one day you would help me discover where the Jezibaba's mother was hidden, in whose body is concealed all the strength and power of all her descendants. If I kill the frog which sits at the bottom of the well and has the blade of grass under its tongue, the Jezibaba and her daughter will be deprived of all their magic power. You have already killed Six-heads and Triple-head with the strength which I gave you.'

Whereupon Orias climbed down into the well. He let himself down and disappeared from Yoko's sight. A moment later he reappeared, and in his hands he held a blade of grass. He gave it to the lad and said, 'Everything's all right now, the frog is dead. Go back to your aunts, and as soon as you wish to return to the world above, summon me with the golden apple — I'll help you.' Before the lad knew, Orias was gone.

Yoko carefully put the blade of grass in a safe pocket and returned to the two women. They both thanked him most ardently for freeing them from the powers of those two underworld monsters. They just couldn't wait to see sunlight again. So Yoko put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his golden apple. He had hardly thrown it from one hand to the other before Orias was there once more.

'First I'll carry you up, Yoko,' he said. 'The way you came down has already been filled in with loose earth, and we shall have to thrust our way out again. But you must leave Triple-head's horse and the silver hammer here.'

Orias then led the lad and the two women to the spot where not so long ago Yoko had fallen the first time. Here, above their heads, there yawned a large hole in the high black ceiling. Orias set the lad on his shoulders and soared up with him to the opening channel which ended in the surface of the earth just near the smithy.

The blacksmith was standing outside it just at that moment and he got a shock when

he saw the ground in front of him opening up — just at the spot where that strange lad with the hammer had disappeared. He watched a huge head rise out of the hollow, and then immediately disappear again. But there before him stood the young lad, whom he recognised at once.

'Whatever . . . ? Is that you again?' cried the blacksmith in amazement. 'By the way, where's my hammer?'

But before Yoko could answer, there was that great big head again! It had hardly appeared before it disappeared again, but there in front of the astonished blacksmith stood a lovely young gypsy girl. It was Medini, the elder of the two sisters. The blacksmith pulled himself together quickly and went up to her, saying, 'I don't know who you are and where you come from. But I know this lad — I saw him disappear into the earth which conceals so many treasures. I see he succeeded in robbing it of a truly rare treasure this time. Please come to my cottage, both of you, and accept my humble hospitality.'

Medini liked the blacksmith's polite words. She smiled at him and nodded. However, Yoko said, 'We're not all here yet. In a moment there'll be another woman and that big man. Will you have enough food for everyone?'

'I've got plenty of milk, for I've got a cow,' replied the blacksmith, 'but there's not much bread . . . Still, I've got a sack of flour.'

'Then I'll bake some bread,' suggested Medini willingly. She didn't wait for an answer from the blacksmith, but hastened into the hut.

The blacksmith followed her. Yoko, however, remained in the hollow and waited for his second aunt. It seemed to him that Orias' journey with the younger Damajanti was taking rather a long time. When he could wait no longer, he felt in his pocket for the golden apple, pulled it out and began throwing it from one hand to the other. He had only done so a few times — and Orias was standing there with Damajanti in his arms. The giant placed her carefully on the ground.

'Where have you been all this time?' asked Yoko. 'I was beginning to fear that something had happened to you.'

'Surely I'm allowed a bit of rest sometimes, aren't I?' muttered Orias, 'And now you can give me back that golden apple,' he ordered. 'You won't be needing it any more now. You'll bring your mother back to life with the blade of grass I gave you and you'll also have a father.' Suddenly he snatched the apple out of Yoko's hand and vanished.

'Who was that?' asked Damajanti in amazement.

'It was the good spirit — Orias,' replied Yoko. 'He helped me to free you and brought me something with which to bring my mother, your sister Yaghvali, back to life.' To his great surprise, however, Damajanti suddenly burst into tears.

'Why are you crying?' asked Yoko, surprised. 'Aren't you glad to be rid of Triple-head and to know that your sister will live again?'

'Yes, I'm glad about that,' answered Damajanti, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

'Then why the tears?' insisted Yoko. But this time Damajanti didn't answer; she just sadly shook her head.

'Surely Orias didn't harm you in any way down there, did he?' asked the lad. But before Damajanti could answer, her sister Medini came running out of the blacksmith's hut. She ran up to him and cried out delightedly, 'I've got good news for you. I'm going to be a bride. The blacksmith and I have just decided to get married.'

Damajanti smiled sadly and said, 'I congratulate you, sister, from the bottom of my heart.'

'Don't be sad,' Medini comforted her, 'you're sure to find yourself a good man for a husband soon, too.' But the younger sister shook her head. 'I shall never marry,' she added quietly.

'But you would be a rich bride,' cried Medini. 'Just look at this!' And she showed her sister what she had in her hand — a handful of silver.

'Where did you get that?' asked Yoko, amazed.

'Those are the silver pellets I had to prepare for Six-heads,' replied Medini. 'I shoved them in my pocket before I left the silver house. Now we will both be rich, and we needn't envy our sister Yaghvali that she married a king.'

'Keep your silver,' said Damajanti sadly, 'and share it with your husband! I shall go to the forest, build myself a cottage and cure people with herbs.'

Yoko could no longer bear to wait till Medini had finished baking the bread. He just drank a little milk and took his leave of the blacksmith and his aunts. Then he hastened home. Fortunately the blacksmith had not yet had time to sell his pony. He returned it to him and wished him a good journey.

Yoko rode up to the chapel where his mother lay, but the door of the chapel was locked. So he tied the pony to the chapel wall, hid himself nearby and waited till his father would arrive. He knew that the prince always came to visit his wife at about this hour. And, indeed, it was not long before he saw the prince riding up.

Yoko's father dismounted from his horse and entered the chapel. He left the door open, so the lad crept in behind him unobserved.

The prince bent over the apparently dead woman and spoke to her softly, 'Not only have I lost you, my lovely Yaghvali, but I even let my father drive our little son out into the world. The heavens have punished me for it, for now I've no one left in the world. My father has died, you are dead, and as for my little Yoko? How will it all end . . . ?'

'I'm here, Father!' cried Yoko at that moment from behind his father's back. The

prince turned around — and the two of them fell into each other's arms. Yoko, however, soon broke from his father's embrace. He went up to the sleeping Yaghvali, pulled the rose from her breast and pulled out the thorn with which the Jezibaba had bewitched her into eternal sleep. Then he lightly touched her lips with the blade of grass which Orias had given him — and lo! Yaghvali opened her eyes. She looked around her wonderingly.

'Where am I?' she asked. 'And who are you?'

'You don't recognise me, my lovely Yaghvali?' called the prince.

When everything had finally been explained, they all went home. And they lived long and happily together. The three sisters, Yaghvali, Medini and Damajanti would often visit one another. Medini and the blacksmith had many children, but Damajanti never married. She lived in the forest, collecting healing herbs and telling people's fortunes. Perhaps it was Orias who taught her these things when they had remained so long underground that time.

The Devil's Plot

There was once a gypsy who earned a bit of money and wanted to build himself a little cottage. He took a long time looking for a suitable spot, but nothing satisfied him. Either the plot was too dear, or it was too far from the forest, or there was no water.

Finally, beyond the village but near the forest, he found a spot where it was all just as he had imagined it should be. And as it was a plot that was common land, the gypsy went to the mayor and asked him what he would have to pay for it.

'Why,' said the mayor, 'you can have that plot for a song. Not a blade of grass ever seems to grow there. No one wants it.' So the deal was soon completed. The gypsy was glad he had got the plot for so little, but he was puzzled by the fact that no one wanted this particular piece of ground. True, it was a bit dry and stony — there was a quarry nearby — but that was its great advantage. Stone for the building would cost nothing, and there was wood in the forest nearby. The gypsy began digging for the foundations. But he had hardly shovelled more than a couple of spadefuls, when suddenly — out of the blue — a fellow in a red coat was standing there in front of him saying, 'You can't dig here; this is our plot.'

'What do you mean — yours?' queried the gypsy, somewhat surprised. 'I paid the mayor a couple of perfectly honest ducats for it.'

'Paid or not paid,' interrupted the Red Coat, 'I'm telling you, this is ours. I'm not interested in the mayor — I am a devil.'

The gypsy looked at him closer and saw — yes! One leg was shorter than the other and the second was stuffed into his boot — probably a cloven hoof. 'So you're a devil, eh,' he said. 'Fine, but even if you were Beelzebub, the prince of the underworld, himself, I paid some honestly-earned money for this bit of land and I'm going to build here.'

'Look here, gypsy,' said the devil reasonably, 'we devils always climb out by this quarry every Saturday and then have a bit of a dance and magicking around on this plot. It wouldn't suit us to have you living here, and it would disturb you, too. I'll tell you what, I'll pay you back the money you spent on this plot and you can buy another.'

'I wouldn't get such a nice plot anywhere else for the same money,' objected the gypsy. 'You'll have to add something to it.'

'Yes, all right,' agreed the devil. 'How much do you want for having to quit the place and leaving it to us?'

'A capful of golden coins,' replied the gypsy.

'Must it be full?' hedged the devil. 'That seems a bit much . . .'

'You devils have got plenty of money,' retorted the gypsy, 'and I am a poor man. I like this place very much and it's mine, because I paid for it fairly. I can sell for what I like, and if a person doesn't like the price, he doesn't have to buy it . . .' He swung his hoe and again began digging the ground.

'Wait a moment!' said the devil hastily; 'I'll bring you the ducats. I haven't got them with me, I'll have to hop over to the quarry, but I'll be back immediately. In the meantime, get your cap ready!'

The devil disappeared into the quarry, and the gypsy put away his shovel and spade, sat down on the ground and waited. Suddenly it occurred to him that it was a shame to leave this nice spot, even for a capful of ducats. So he pulled a knife out of his pocket and

cut a slit in the centre of his cap. Then he seized the spade and quickly dug out a hollow in the ground — not very broad but rather deep. He covered the top of the hole with some stones and left only a small opening, over which he placed his slit cap.

Shortly afterwards the devil returned. In his hand he had a bulky old sack. 'Where's your cap?' he asked.

'Here,' said the gypsy pointing to it. The devil began tipping the contents of the sack into the cap. The ducats tinkled away as they fell down, but when the gypsy looked at the cap — it seemed to be empty. 'But there's nothing in that cap,' he cried. 'Are you trying to cheat me, you devil? You think that you can deceive me by making the coins tinkle and then you just magic them away again. No, my lad, I'm not having that. I'm not all that stupid, that I'd let myself be had so easily.'

'But I really have been tipping them in,' said the devil defensively. He took a look at the cap himself — and it honestly was empty. Then he shook his head slowly. 'How could that have happened?'

'Can't imagine,' replied the gypsy. 'Either you bring me proper ducats, or that's the end of this place for you!'

'I'll bring some others,' said the devil. He turned and disappeared into the quarry. The gypsy grinned contentedly, sat down on the ground, lit a pipe and waited . . .

This time the devil brought a larger and heavier sack. When he had emptied it into the cap, it turned out that there was only a thin layer of coins lying at the bottom.

'Is that what you call a full cap?' asked the gypsy scornfully. 'No, my lad, we're not going to come to terms like that! Either you bring me some more ducats, or I won't sell you the plot.'

'What sort of a cap have you got there?' grumbled the devil. 'You surely can't have such a large head, that you need a cap that's big enough to take two sackfuls of gold coins?'

'It doesn't seem big,' grinned the gypsy, 'but actually my head's pretty large — and there's quite a thing or two in it, as well!' He laughed, sat down on the ground and went on smoking.

When the devil returned from the quarry the third time with an even larger sack and tipped the contents into the cap, this time, finally, it was full. 'That'll do now,' said the gypsy approvingly. 'You can go. I'll just collect my things and then I'll be off. You won't see me here again.'

'A good thing, too, I can tell you,' muttered the devil. 'But that cap of yours still puzzles me. How can you get so much into it?'

'Well, it's like this,' laughed the gypsy. 'You can't cover a head full of wits except with a cap that can hold at least a couple of sacks of ducats. And as for wits, you can't

buy them at any price. Those who haven't this,' and he tapped his pocket, 'have to have at least this,' and he tapped his forehead.

The devil merely mumbled something gruffly and vanished. The gypsy uncovered the hole, collected the ducats, loaded them onto his cart, covered them with a shirt and drove off.

In fact, he really had a lot of gold — but coins are round and easily roll away. The gypsy bought a nice house and a horse and married a beautiful girl from a poor family. And a beautiful girl costs money. Children also need things. In short, by the time a few years had passed the gypsy found his ducats diminishing to such an extent that there was only one thin layer of them left in the chest. What was to be done? During their years of plenty he and his wife had become accustomed to being lazy; neither of them wanted to work. Soon they hadn't a single ducat left in the chest. They began selling the things which they had bought earlier, and they began going more and more downhill. The woman grew more and more disgruntled. She blamed her husband for bringing them to this beggary and for spending all the money — as though he had been spending it all on himself! One day, when she was blaming him as usual and grumbling that they hadn't even enough to buy food, the gypsy got fed up and left the house. He told himself that he had had enough of these endless grumbles and quarrels and that he would go out into the world on his own. Let his wife look after herself, if all she could do was to grumble and blame him!

He wandered on and on, until by chance he found himself by a forest which seemed familiar. He looked round and blinked his eyes — why, surely this was the very spot where he had wanted to build a cottage some years previously. He recognised the devil's plot by the quarry quite plainly. He halted and began wondering, 'The devil who brought me that money was a real idiot. He never even noticed how I fooled him with that cap of mine. Perhaps I might be able to get a few more ducats out of him again.'

He went slowly up to the quarry, looked inside and saw that it covered quite a large area. So this was where the devils met! The one he had known had said at the time that they came out every Saturday. This was Sunday . . . was he to wait here for a whole week?

The gypsy was a brave fellow. He crossed himself and entered the quarry. But he had only gone a couple of steps, when there was Red Coat standing before him.

'What do you want, gypsy?' cried the devil irritatedly. 'Aha! So it's you again, is it? You're the one who cheated me once with that cap of yours. I got a fine ticking off from our ruler, Beelzebub, then. We found the hole you made, over which you placed a cap with a slit in it. But now you're in my hands and I'm going to pay you back for that trick of yours, with interest, too!'

The gypsy was secretly very alarmed, but he didn't let it show and just answered,

'I don't know what you're getting at, but — I warn you! If you want to fight me, you'd better know that I am very strong. You can't get the better of me as easily as all that. And if you don't leave me alone in peace, I'll break up your quarry for you.'

'You — a strong man?' said the devil scornfully. 'I wonder if you can do this?' And he stretched out his arm, broke off a piece of the rock, crushed the stone in his palm and then opened it. In his filthy hand there was just a pile of dust.

The gypsy was secretly even more alarmed. But again he didn't let on. Suddenly he remembered that when he left home he had taken a couple of soft cottage cheeses with him. He quickly put his hand in his pocket, took one of them out, hiding the cheese in his palm, and stretched out his arm, pretending to be breaking off a piece of the rock.

'That's nothing!' he said loudly. 'Now look what I can do to a piece of rock when I crush it.' He crushed the cream cheese — and thin whey began dripping out between his fingers. This truly amazed the devil. He shook his head at the thought of the strength of a gypsy who could crush a rock in his bare hand till it began dripping water.

'It's quite possible,' he thought to himself, 'that the gypsy may be as strong as he says he is. He can crush a stone till it drips water — that's certainly something I can't do. Supposing he were to do what he threatens and demolished our quarry? Then I would really be in for it from Beelzebub.' In the end he decided to come to terms with the gypsy.

'Look here,' said the devil. 'Don't do anything so silly as to break up our hideout; it took us a long time to find this quarry and that nice plot of land, so don't go and spoil the place for us!'

'What will you give me in exchange?' asked the gypsy.

'I'll give you a sack full of ducats,' promised the devil.

'Very well. Bring it here! But I tell you — it must be at least as big and bulky as you are yourself. Otherwise I will break up this quarry.'

'Just wait a moment, I'll bring it all right,' the devil assured him, and vanished at once. The gypsy calmly sat on the ground and waited.

The devil was back in no time. On his back he carried a really big, clumsy old sack, as big as himself. He dumped it down on the ground and said, 'There you are! Now go home!' But the gypsy remained seated and just shook his head. He knew very well that he was not strong enough to lift such a heavy bag, let alone carry it right home. But of course he couldn't tell the devil that. He would know at once that he had been fooled again, and would be sure to tear the gypsy to pieces on the spot.

The gypsy wracked his brains for a way to get the sack of gold home without betraying himself. At last he said, 'I'm not in the mood for taking such a heavy weight just at the moment. You carry it for me!'

'What's that?' cried the devil angrily. 'And be your servant into the bargain?'

'You don't need to if you don't want to,' said the gypsy lazily, 'but if you don't carry this sack of gold for me right to my back-yard, I'll break up your quarry.'

'No, not that!' cried the devil anxiously. He bent over, seized the sack, heaved it on his back and limped off out of the quarry, the gypsy following calmly behind. All the way home he whistled cheerfully. The devil there in front carried the heavy burden on his shoulders and did nothing but grumble. Finally they reached the house where the gypsy lived. He opened the gate and ordered the devil to put down his load. The devil threw down the sack with relief and straightened his back.

'Thank you,' said the gypsy cheerfully, 'you can go now. My regards to your friends, and tell them that this time you only just got away with it.' The devil only muttered something, shivered and vanished.

The gypsy entered the house. His wife was sitting by the cold grate, crying. When she saw her husband, she jumped up joyfully and ran towards him, embraced him and cried, 'My kind, good old man, my precious one! It will never happen again.'

'I hope not,' said the gypsy, 'because our troubles are over now, and we've got something to live on once more.'

'Did you earn some money in the world then?' asked his wife. The gypsy opened the door and pointed to the yard. 'There it is. A sackful. But in future we'll be a bit more careful with it, because I wouldn't like to meet that devil a third time.'

'A devil?' asked his wife incredulously. When he didn't answer, she began insisting that he tell her where he had obtained the money. Finally it got on the gypsy's nerves.

'Where do you think it's from then?' he blurted out roughly. 'It is from hell and nowhere else. It is devils' money and I got it out of them because I am not afraid of a devil. But I assure you, it wasn't all that pleasant. And if I ever need money again, I would a thousand times rather earn it by honest labour.'

The King's Sons

Once there was a king who, as a young man, had fought and travelled a great deal. He had had a friend with whom he had won many a battle and traversed many parts of the world. But when age began to tell on them, they had both decided they would settle down and get married. They found themselves young wives, and each went off to his own kingdom, though these were very far from one another.

The older king, the one about whom our story is told, very much hoped that his bride would give him a son. But a year passed, then a second and a third, and still nothing. The king was very troubled by this. His queen visited many doctors and made pilgrimages; she prayed and spent a great deal of money, but all in vain.

Then one day, when the queen and he were riding in their carriage, an old gypsy woman stepped into their path and begged for alms. The king threw her a ducat, the gypsy caught it and said, 'Show me your hand, noble lady, and let me tell your fortune!'

The queen held out her hand to the gypsy.

'I see you have a great worry,' said the gypsy. 'If your husband would give me a second coin like that, possibly I might be able to help you.'

The king gave her another ducat and the gypsy woman advised him as follows, 'Tomorrow, before the sun rises, go fishing in the river. Throw the first two fishes you catch back into the water, but take the third fish home and give it to your wife. She must bake it and eat the whole of it, and I mean the whole of it. She mustn't throw away the smallest piece, or allow any one else to eat any of the bits. If she does all this, you will bring about the one thing you both desire most.'

The next day, before sunrise, the king took his fishing tackle and went to the river. He had hardly cast the line before it began bobbing about and the float sank to the bottom. The king pulled on the rod and drew in a great big fish. He was sorry to throw such a beautiful catch back into the water, but he remembered the gypsy woman's words and did so. He fixed the bait again and in no time had a second fish. When he drew it in he saw that it was even larger than the first. Nevertheless, again he threw it back into the river and started fishing a third time.

A long time passed, and the float never stirred. The king was beginning to regret throwing away the first two catches, when suddenly the float sank deep down into the

water. The king hauled in, wound in slowly and finally drew out a fish such as he had never seen in all his life. It was almost as big as a suckling pig.

The king took the fish home and gave it to his wife. The queen summoned the cook and told her, 'Bake this fish for me, but be careful to see that not the smallest piece gets lost. You mustn't gut it or scrape it, just bake it as it is, and bring it to me in one piece.'

The cook didn't like the idea. 'I've served the king for forty years,' she muttered to herself, 'but I've never heard such nonsense in all my life. Bake a fish with all its innards in! The mistress doesn't know what she is talking about.' So she gutted the fish, cut off its head and tail and threw them, together with the innards, to the dog. She salted the rest and put it on a baking dish topped with a knob of butter. After a while she wanted to test whether the fish was cooked properly, so she broke a bit off and ate it. The baked fish she then carried to her mistress.

'Didn't I tell you to bake me the fish in one piece,' exclaimed the queen. 'Where are the tail and head?'

When the cook saw that her mistress was annoyed, she was afraid to admit that she had not obeyed instructions, and so she lied, 'I left the fish a bit too long in the oven and it all fell apart with overbaking. Now it's all mixed together, and that's why you cannot distinguish either the head or tail.'

The queen believed her and began eating the fish. It covered the whole baking tray, and the queen couldn't eat it all at once. She ate fish in the morning, at midday and in the evening for a full three days, and finally, when she had finished it at last, she knew she wouldn't be able to look at a fish for the rest of her days. Soon afterwards, however, she informed the king that he would have an heir. The king was highly delighted. Now just at that time the cook also came running to the queen, but in tears, saying she was going to have a child, too.

The queen shook her head over the idea, but said, 'Don't cry, there's no shame or bad luck in having a child. We'll look after it.'

The cook wiped her eyes, kissed the queen's hand and went back to work.

After a time the queen gave birth to a handsome son. And on that very day, at the same hour and the same minute, the cook also gave birth to a healthy little lad, a lad who was the spitting image of the king's own child. But that was not all. Suddenly the king's page came running in all agog, and began telling the king how his spaniel bitch had just given birth to a child instead of a puppy, and that it was a boy, too!

All three boys, born at the same instant, were so similar to look at that no one could tell them apart. So the king decided he would bring them all up as though they were his own. He had three identical cradles made for them, and when the infants were laid in them, suddenly no one knew which was the queen's, which the cook's and

which the spaniel's. The king was somewhat dismayed, but the matter could no longer be put right.

The boys grew fast, and though they were quite indistinguishable in looks, at least they began to show signs of having different natures. One was rebellious and lazy, the second was greedy and slightly stupid, and the third was very clever and obedient and showed great devotion to the king. For this reason the king loved him most of the three. And he sincerely believed that it was he who was his own son, and therefore hoped to make him his successor. As time passed, however, he began to have doubts, doubts as to whether the one that was his favourite really was his own. Suppose he was the cook's child? Or — God forbid — the son of the spaniel? How could he be convinced that the one he would make his successor would really be his and the queen's child?

One day the king set off into the forest to hunt. Suddenly he noticed the same old gypsy woman coming towards him along the path. He sprang from his horse and said, 'Surely it was you who advised me so well some time ago about the fish? Now I have three sons, but the trouble is, I don't know which of them is really my own. One was borne by my wife, one was brought into the world by the cook and one by the page's dog. If you can tell me how I may find out which of them is mine, I shall reward you well.'

'That's easy,' replied the gypsy woman. 'When you arrive home, summon your three sons, take a whip and give them all a good beating. The one who accepts all the blows without turning a hair, and into the bargain still comes and kisses your hand, is the spaniel's son. The one who starts crying and complaining is the son of the cook. But the one who defends himself and tries to hold your hand is your own son.'

The king thanked the gypsy woman, rewarded her richly for her advice and rode home. He summoned his sons, took a whip and began beating them. But only one of them accepted the blows without a murmur. A second one began crying and screaming, and the third finally seized his father's hand and tried to get hold of the whip. The first brother looked reproachfully at his brother, then went to his father and kissed his hand.

The king was thoroughly crushed, for the one who had kissed his hand was his favourite, but by no means his own son. He was the spaniel's child! The prince who had defended himself was his and the queen's, but was the one who was rebellious and lazy, and the lad that had cried was the cook's son. The king sighed, but so as to be able to discriminate between them, he had coloured ribbons tied round their wrists. He gave his own son a blue ribbon, the cook's son a white one and the spaniel's son a red. He also gave each of them a name. So far it had not been possible to name them, because they had always got mixed up again. From now on the prince with the blue ribbon was called Arpad, the cook's son with the white ribbon Janos and the third, the spaniel's child, was given the name Gojaver.

When the lads grew up, the king summoned them one day and told them, 'Now you are grown up, it's time you went out into the world and had a look round to gain experience. I've decided that my successor will be the one who goes farthest and brings back something I have never seen. Go to the stables and choose yourselves horses and off you go!'

Arpad and Janos didn't like the king's suggestion in the least. They began complaining and protesting, but Gojaver said, 'Father is right, brothers. Let's do as he says and go out into the world; a little experience won't hurt us.'

So the brothers chose the best horses they could find in their father's stables and rode off. They rode a long way, till one day they came to a strange orchard. The fruit growing on the trees were plums, not blue ones as one would expect, but silver ones. Arpad picked one and exclaimed, 'I'm sure father has never seen a silver plum. I'll take him one! He's sure to make me his successor for that.' And he turned his horse, not waiting for the others, and rode back home.

'How stupid of me,' said Janos, 'not to have thought of picking one of those plums before Arpad did. I might have been riding home by now and become father's successor.'

'Who knows, maybe there are far stranger things in the world than silver plums,' suggested Gojaver cheerfully. 'Let's go on and see!'

So the two brothers rode on, till one day they came to an orchard which was even more strange than the first. Here there were apples growing, not red or green ones, but gold ones! Janos hastily plucked one and exclaimed, 'Now, this is surely something far better than a silver plum. A golden apple! I'm sure father cannot possibly have ever seen anything like this.' And so saying, he turned his horse and rode home.

Gojaver just shrugged his shoulders and rode on alone. He rode on and on for a long time, till at last he found himself in a strange wood. The trees, bushes, grass and flowers were all made of diamonds here, diamonds which glittered in the sunlight and sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow. In the centre of the wood stood a magnificent golden castle, the walls of which were studded with precious stones, with windows of crystal. But in front of the castle Gojaver saw something even more strange. Seated on a high chair which slowly revolved, round and round, was a horrible old ugly woman. Long white wispy hair flowed round her shoulders, and in one hand she held a sword, in the other a golden trumpet. On her head she had a golden crown, set with diamonds. Gojaver hastily slipped behind a tree so that the old woman wouldn't see him, thinking to himself, 'My father has surely never seen anything like that.' He bent over, wanting to pick one of the diamond flowers. But the moment he touched it, the plant wailed, 'Don't pluck me — it hurts!' Gojaver pulled back his hand; then he wanted to break off a sparkling twig from one of the diamond trees. But the moment he touched it, the tree groaned, 'Don't pull it — it hurts!' Gojaver didn't want to harm the tree, but how could he bring

his father some witness to the diamond wood? He bent over again, to pick at least a single blade of diamond grass. But the grass trembled in his hand and a gentle little bell-like voice beseeched him, 'Please don't pick me, Gojaver. Go back home and tell no one what you have seen here! Ask your father to let you have the old clothes he used to wear when he went to the wars as a young man with his friend. Ask him also to give you the sword he fought with and the horse he rode. When you have got them all, set out again for this place and you will be very rich and fortunate.'

Gojaver obeyed the instructions, and instead of picking anything, he mounted his horse and rode home.

When Arpad, the king's own son, returned, bringing his father the silver plum from his travels, the king burst out laughing.

'Well, my son, you didn't get very far, did you, now,' he said. 'The orchard of silver plums is only a stone's throw from the boundaries of our kingdom. When I was your age, I used to ride to the silver wood every morning before breakfast with my friend.'

The following day, when Janos rode up with the golden apple, the king said to him, 'My lad, you call that a journey into the wide world? That orchard of golden apples doesn't lie any distance from the boundaries of our kingdom. When I was your age, I used to go there for a ride with my friend almost every afternoon.'

The two princes were very disappointed with their father's response. Now it annoyed them that they hadn't ridden farther, and they were curious to see what Gojaver would bring. How delighted they were when, not long after, the third brother rode up — and hadn't brought their father anything at all. He said to the king, 'Father, I didn't find anything in the world which you wouldn't have seen already, for you have been everywhere and know everything. Nevertheless, I want to go and look once more and adventure even further. But I have one wish: Give me the old clothes you used to wear on going to war, the old sword you fought with, and also, please let me have the horse you used to ride in those days.'

The king was taken aback. Then he began making excuses — that the clothes he used to wear as a young man were too old and ragged, that the sword he fought with was rusty and that the horse he used to ride was already lame and almost blind. But Gojaver wouldn't take no for an answer and the king had to give in. He told Gojaver that he would find the old clothes and the sword in the attic and that the horse was already lying at the knacker's yard, where it had been taken from the stables, because the old beast was completely useless by now. Gojaver thanked him and went off.

And indeed he found the king's old clothes and sword in the attic. The costume was almost rotting away, but when Gojaver put it on, it fitted him like a glove. He cleaned the rusty sword, girded it to his waist and went to the knacker's yard. There he also found

the old, lame, almost-blind horse. He tried in vain to stand the poor creature on its legs, but when he saw he would get nowhere that way, he picked the beast up and carried it off to the castle on his back. He had hardly left the yard, however, when the horse on his back neighed and spoke with a human voice, 'Make a fire, Gojaver, and feed me with flames!'

Gojaver was most surprised, but did as he was bid. He put the horse down on the ground and made a fire. 'How am I to feed you?' he asked the horse.

'Take a twig, put it in the fire and, when its tip is glowing in the flame, put it in my mouth,' replied the horse. Gojaver did as the horse had said. And hardly had the creature swallowed the burning twig, than it sprang up on all fours, and the amazed Gojaver had a completely different horse standing in front of him. It was no longer the old, lame, half-blind nag, but a splendid black steed, whose skin glistened like silk. Its eyes shone moistly, it was tossing its mane and stamping the ground with its hooves.

'Mount me, Gojaver,' neighed the horse, 'but hold on well, as we shall fly like the wind.'

Gojaver sprang on the horse's back, and off they flew. In less than no time they had reached the orchard with the silver plums. And before Gojaver knew where he was, the orchard with the golden apples was far behind them. He had hardly had time to think, when he saw the diamond wood lying there before him. And that was where the horse came to a halt.

'Now be careful, Gojaver! The old crone who sits on that revolving chair in front of the castle is a wicked witch. She has cast a spell on the lord of the diamond castle; his daughter and the servants are the trees, the flowers and the grass. The lord of this castle is that friend of your father's, with whom he went to the wars as a young man. Your father doesn't know of the misfortune which befell him. You must liberate your father's friend, but first you must kill that wicked witch. And you can do it all like this: When the old crone turns her back on you as the chair revolves, spring on her and seize the sword and trumpet from her hands. You must do it swiftly and seize both things almost instantaneously, so that she doesn't have time either to wave the sword or blow the trumpet. If that should happen, it will be the end of you. If you succeed, however, in getting both the sword and the trumpet, you must immediately cut off the witch's head. Do you think you can manage it?'

'Why not?' laughed Gojaver, 'there's nothing difficult about that.' He waited till the old crone on her chair turned her back on him. 'Now!' he commanded, and the horse sprang forward. Gojaver seized the witch's sword with one hand and with the other he grabbed her trumpet, and before the witch knew what was happening, the rider had swung the sword and the witch's head was off. It rolled, together with the diamond-studded crown, right under the window of the golden castle.

At that moment the diamond wood, trees, bushes, flowers and grass all vanished. In their place there were crowds of people. There was a cook and a chef, chamberlains and servants, equerries and grooms, and all of them were shouting and rejoicing. Suddenly, two of the castle windows opened, and a king and a lovely princess appeared.

'My diamond crown,' cried the king. 'Someone give me my crown!' But the people were afraid to touch the Jezibaba's head, even though it lay a long way from her dead body. Whereupon Gojaver dismounted from his horse, bent down, pulled the diamond-studded crown from the Jezibaba's head and carried it to the king. The latter was hurrying towards him with the princess.

Gojaver gave the king his crown and bowed low before him.

'Who are you, brave fellow,' asked the king, 'that you succeeded in freeing us from our long years of enchantment?'

'Don't you recognise these clothes and the sword, sir?' replied Gojaver.

'Why, of course,' cried the king happily. 'Surely those are the clothes and the sword of the old friend of my youth. Are you his son?'

'Yes, I am, and my name is Gojaver,' replied the prince.

'And this is the old horse belonging to him, too! How could I have failed to recognise it,' cried the king. 'Gojaver, this is my only daughter. If you like her, you may marry her.'

Gojaver was very delighted with the princess, but because he was devoted to his father, he told the king that first he must return home and ask his father for permission to marry. The king approved of this action and took a splendid gold ring with a large jewel off his finger, gave it to Gojaver and said, 'Show this ring to your father and tell him that the man who lent you this ring wishes to give you his only daughter in marriage. You'll see, he is sure to agree.'

Gojaver put the ring on his own finger, took leave of the king and the princess, mounted his horse and rode home. It was not long before he saw his father's castle before him. But the horse suddenly halted. 'It would be better,' it said, 'if I were to become what I was before you fed me with flames. But first, pull out a hair from my tail. If you need me, rub it between your fingers and I shall be at your service at once.'

So Gojaver pulled one black hair from the horse's tail, and at that instant it was not a high-spirited fiery steed standing before him, but the old, worn-out creature he had taken from the knacker's yard. It could hardly stand on its legs. Gojaver heaved it on to his back and took it home.

Arpad and Janos watched their brother carry in the old horse on his back and they ran laughing to their father to tell him. The old king, however, didn't laugh. He just sullenly awaited Gojaver's arrival.

Gojaver bowed respectfully to his father, kissed his hand and said, 'Once again I do not bring you anything you have not seen before, Father. Indeed I bring you something you probably know very well indeed.' He took the ring off his finger and gave it to the king.

'Why, that's the ring belonging to my old friend!' cried the king. 'Did you find the old friend of my youth? How is he?' So Gojaver told him the story of what happened. The king listened attentively, but somehow he didn't look satisfied. 'Can it be,' he thought to himself, 'that the son of the spaniel should marry my friend's only daughter, my friend, who is even richer and more powerful than I? Surely it would be better if she were to marry my own son?' He was about to put the ring in his pocket, but Gojaver said, 'No, please give me back the ring, father. Your friend only lent it to me, it isn't mine . . .' So the king gave him back the ring, but he was still frowning. He didn't tell Gojaver

that he approved of his marriage to the princess; he just sent him away with the excuse that his head ached, promising he would discuss it with him later.

When Gojaver had gone, the king again pondered over what the spaniel's son had told him. He had told him everything, except the fact that he had fed the old horse with flames. But the king knew well the horse that had formerly carried him into battle. When the beast had grown old, he had had it thrown to the knacker's yard. Now he doubted the wisdom of this deed. He summoned Arpad, his own son, and said to him, 'Go to the knacker's yard. The old horse is there which carried your brother Gojaver out into the world. Rub it down and feed it well. When it recovers, mount it and let it carry you whither it pleases!'

'What's that? That old nag, the one my brother had to carry home on his back?' cried Arpad disgustedly.

'Yes,' said the king. 'That nag carried your brother farther than either of you went on your two fine horses. Go, and do as I say!'

There was nothing to be done; Arpad just had to obey his father.

He went to the knacker's yard, where the old horse was lying. He tried to raise it, but to no avail. Angrily he beat it with a whip. At that moment Gojaver was passing by. 'Why are you beating the poor creature?' he asked his brother.

'Because it doesn't want to stand,' retorted Arpad angrily. 'Father has ordered me to rub it down, feed it well and go out into the world with it.'

Whereupon Gojaver realised that his father didn't want him to marry his friend's only daughter. It made him feel very sad, but since he still respected his father's wishes, he said to his brother, 'Do what Father ordered, but don't feed the beast with oats; make a fire and feed it with flames.'

'How ridiculous!' said Arpad.

'Do as I say,' said Gojaver sadly. 'It isn't just an ordinary horse. If you feed it on flames, it will carry you where Father wishes.' Having said that, he turned away and left him.

Arpad thought it over, and in the end did as his brother had suggested. He made a fire and fed the horse on flames. The nag had scarcely tasted the fire, when it was transformed into a splendid fiery steed. Arpad sprang on its back and the horse flew off at once.

The steed carried Arpad to the castle with the diamond-studded walls, and the king, seeing the rider coming from the window, ran to meet him. He thought it was Gojaver. The princess also ran to welcome her bridegroom. When Arpad beheld her, he stood as though transfixed. He had never seen such a lovely girl in his life.

'Welcome,' said the king to Arpad. 'Your father has sent you back, so surely he agrees that you should marry my daughter, doesn't he?' Arpad nodded disconcertedly.

'So we can celebrate the wedding at once,' said the king. 'But first give me back my ring.'

'What ring?' asked Arpad uncomprehendingly.

The king frowned. 'The one I lent you, so that you could show it to your father,' he replied severely. 'Or perhaps your father didn't give it back to you?'

'But he didn't give me anything of the kind, and anyway I've never seen your ring in my life,' said Arpad defensively. Whereupon the king got very angry. 'You're a liar and a fraud!' he cried. 'I won't let you marry my daughter, and you'll go straight to prison.' He summoned servants and bade them bind Arpad and throw him into prison.

Back at home the king vainly waited for news of his son. After many days had passed and Arpad still showed no sign of returning, the king began to get worried. He hesitated for a long time but finally, being at his wit's end, he summoned Gojaver and, not daring to look him in the eye, told him, 'I sent your brother out into the world with the old horse, but he has taken a long time to return. I'm afraid something evil must have happened to him. Of all you three, Arpad is the only one who is really my own son. I brought you all up together, but he is the only one that is really of my own flesh and blood. Please forgive me that I cheated you, but I wanted him to marry the daughter of my old friend in place of you, who liberated her. Now my son has got lost. Please help me to find him, my little spaniel's son, for the sake of everything good I have done for you.'

'Me — a spaniel's son?' cried Gojaver.

'Yes,' nodded the king, and he told him the story of the fish. Gojaver listened to him in silence, and when the king had finished, he kissed his hand and said, 'Thank you for looking after me as one of your own children for all those years. I will find your son Arpad, and send him safe back to you.' He bowed low and went away.

As soon as Gojaver was outside the castle, he felt in his pocket for the horse's hair and rubbed it between his fingers. Whereupon — from out of the blue — his fiery black steed stood before him. Gojaver swung up on its back and flew off to the diamond-studded castle. Outside the castle Gojaver dismounted and went straight to see the king. When the king saw him, he exclaimed angrily, 'What are you doing here? How did you manage to escape from prison?'

'I have just arrived from my father,' replied Gojaver, 'to return the ring you lent me.' He handed the king his ring. The king took it and shook his head in bewilderment. 'Didn't you say you had never seen my ring then?' he cried, amazed. 'Wasn't it because of that lie that I had you thrown into prison?'

'That was not me,' replied Gojaver. 'That was my brother Arpad. You see we are three brothers and all very much alike. Arpad came here in place of me and he really did

know nothing about the ring. He is innocent, and I beg you to release him and send him home.'

The king immediately ordered the release of Arpad from prison, and Arpad was so glad of his freedom, that he had no other desire but to return home as quickly as possible. He begged Gojaver to lend him the horse, and apologised for not waiting for his wedding to the princess. Gojaver was glad to let him go.

So Gojaver, the spaniel's son, married the daughter of the diamond king, and they were very happy together, as all their children were as good and as noble as their father.

The Princess from Ice Mountain

In a land beyond seven mountain ranges and seven rivers, a gypsy once cast a spell on the son of a rich *gadja* (non-gypsy) whose name was Fedma. His parents were already old when he was born, and they died soon afterwards. Fedma inherited large estates, and he was advised to get married, but he just never could find the right girl. People told him, 'Don't be so choosy, Fedma, or you'll never marry!' But he merely laughed and said to himself, there's time enough.

Now the prince of that land had a daughter, who was attracted by Fedma. She was a few years older than he, but she was fairly good-looking and quite clever. She travelled a great deal, and knew a lot. Several times she showed her partiality for Fedma, and when that didn't work, she once told him straight out that she would like to marry him. Fedma replied, 'You've travelled the world and are very wise. I've not been anywhere yet and I'm stupid. Before I get married, I want to take a bit of a look at the world.'

'Well, take a look then, you old icicle!' exclaimed the prince's daughter angrily. 'Try travelling to the Land of Ice and marry the woman there who has a heart about as cold as yours!'

'And who is that woman?' asked Fedma.

'Tindir Gudrun — the wicked enchantress, who lives on the Ice Mountain with her brother, Hormond, the strong man,' replied the princess.

'Is she beautiful?' Fedma wanted to know.

'Yes, she's lovely, but very cruel; she transforms all her suitors into icicles,' replied the princess. 'She wouldn't have to transform you; you are one already.' And she turned her back on Fedma and went away.

Fedma began asking people about this Tindir Gudrun. Some of them had heard of her, others not. So he decided he would go out into the world where there were other people, and perhaps some of them would know more. For his journey he took just a horse, a purse full of money and a sword. One day, as he was journeying along, he came across a throng of people. He asked them what was up and they told him that they were hurrying to the nearby gallows, where a deserter from the army was to be hanged. Fedma rode along with them, and when he came to the gallows field, he saw the hangman standing there about to tie the rope round the condemned man's neck.

'I wonder how a man feels who is just going to be hanged?' he thought to himself. He rode up to have a look at him, and when he came close, he noticed that the fellow was the spitting image of himself. If he hadn't known that he, Fedma, was sitting there on his horse, he would have thought that they were trying to hang him.

'But I can't let them hang someone who could be my own brother,' thought Fedma. He dismounted, went up to the hangman and said, 'Is it possible to buy this man's life and save him from hanging?'

The hangman considered, and seeing that he had a rich man standing before him, said, 'Everything is possible if a man has money.' He looked at Fedma once again, then looked at the condemned one and asked, 'Is he your brother?'

'Everyone is someone's brother, if you come to think of it,' replied Fedma evasively. 'How much do you want for letting the poor chap go?'

'It is not my affair,' said the hangman. 'It is a matter for the king. This young fellow got himself enlisted for the sum of fifty ducats, and then he ran away. They caught him, but he no longer had the money to pay back. If you can pay it for him, I'll let him go.'

'Here's one hundred ducats for you, fifty for the king and fifty for yourself,' said Fedma, handing the hangman the purse of money. The latter immediately untied the rope from the prisoner's neck and let him go.

'What's your name,' Fedma asked the man whom he had rescued. The man didn't even thank him; he just frowned.

'Throwing away good money for nothing,' he said crossly. 'I am Rojeo, the strong man; they wouldn't find it so easy to hang me. And who are you, anyway? You remind me of someone, but I can't think who.'

'Most likely yourself,' laughed Fedma. 'You see we are very like — just look.' He pulled out a small mirror from his pocket and handed it to the man.

'Upon my word!' cried Rojeo in amazement. 'We're as alike as two peas!'

'That's why I bought your life,' nodded Fedma. 'Would you like to be friends, Rojeo?'

'But I'm a gypsy,' replied Rojeo.

'That is no matter, you can be my friend just the same,' urged Fedma.

'Very well. And what is your name?'

'Fedma.'

'I would like to be your faithful friend unto death, Fedma,' said Rojeo, giving his hand to Fedma, who pressed it sincerely.

'And where are you going, Fedma?' Rojeo then asked.

'I am travelling to the Land of Ice, to seek the beautiful enchantress Tindir Gudrun and her brother Hormond. Perhaps you have heard of them?'

'I've not only heard of them,' said Rojeo, 'but I've actually been to the Land of the Swedes and to the Ice Mountain where they live.'

'You've been there?' cried Fedma, delighted. 'So you know the way to the Ice Mountain. Please take me there, my friend! I want to have a look at Tindir Gudrun, to convince myself that she really is as lovely as they say.'

'She's lovely to look at, certainly,' said Rojeo, 'but all the same, I don't advise you to go there.'

'But I want to see her,' Fedma insisted. 'And if I really find her lovely, I want to marry her.'

'It is not all that easy,' said Rojeo, shaking his head. 'Her brother guards her very strictly and he is a powerfully strong man. Hormond is the strongest of the strong and will not allow anyone to take his sister away from the Ice Mountain. Tindir Gudrun lies there in an icy coffin. There are twenty-four candles round the coffin — as many candles as Gudrun is years old. Anyone who wishes to win her hand must blow all the candles out at one blow. Who fails the task gets transformed into an icicle. Since no one has yet succeeded in doing it there is now a long double row of tall icicles in front of the palace.'

'When you were there, did you try?' asked Fedma. 'How is it you weren't turned into an icicle too?'

'I didn't try,' answered Rojeo. 'I must never marry, otherwise I would lose my strength,' explained Rojeo.

'Then come with me, blow out the twenty-four candles for me, and I'll marry Gudrun,' suggested Fedma.

'No, I won't do that,' said Rojeo, shaking his head.

'Because you can't,' cried Fedma.

'I could, if I wanted to, but as I am your friend, I want to warn you. Tindir is a wicked enchantress and her brother is even worse. Even if you succeeded in winning his sister, he would revenge himself on you and give you no peace.'

'But I want her,' repeated Fedma obstinately. 'And you don't want to help me, because you're not strong enough to blow out the candles in one blow.'

'If you weren't my friend, I would teach you to doubt my words in a different way. But as I've promised eternal friendship to you, I'll show you that I speak the truth. You see that high oak tree over there?'

There was a mighty oak standing about ten paces away from them. Rojeo took a deep breath and blew at the tree. The oak trembled, as though hit by a strong wind. Rojeo filled his lungs a second time and blew again. This time the oak heaved and the trunk bent right backwards. Rojeo blew a third time, and the tree overturned, roots and all, and fell to the ground.

'You still don't believe me?' asked Rojeo.

Fedma stood there completely nonplussed. He could never have believed such a thing possible. At last he said, 'Forgive me, my friend. I see you really are a very powerful man. Come with me to the ice palace and help me win Tindir Gudrun as my wife! I implore you!'

'Well, if you're not to be dissuaded, let's go!' sighed Rojeo.

The two friends mounted Fedma's horse and rode to the nearest town. There, Fedma bought a second horse and two sets of identical clothes for himself and his new friend. When they were dressed in these clothes, no one could have told them apart. Their horses were also identical. And thus they set off for the Land of Ice. They rode a long, long time, till one day they came to the foot of the Ice Mountain. The pathway up it was very hard going, but they managed it, and when at last they found themselves at the top, they saw a palace made entirely of ice. A broad alley of tall icicles led up to the palace gates and they had all taken the form of human beings. The gates of the palace were wide open, so they rode in and found themselves in a wide courtyard, where there were a number of strange ice blocks. These all looked like horses, and Rojeo told Fedma that they were the horses belonging to Tindir's suitors, which the enchantress had bewitched into the shape of ice blocks, like their masters.

All at once — from out of the blue — a great white-haired, white-bearded giant stood before them. It was Hormond, the strongest of the strong. He welcomed his guests with a great show of politeness, then invited them into the house and offered them refreshments, though all the food was as cold as ice.

'I presume you've come to try for my sister's hand, haven't you?' Hormond asked them, while eating a cake with ice-cold icing.

'I'm the one who wishes to wed her,' replied Fedma.

'And the other fellow? Your brother?' inquired Hormond.

'He's just accompanying me,' replied Fedma.

'You know what task awaits you?' asked Hormond.

'Yes, I know,' nodded Rojeo, and Hormond looked at him in surprise, as their voices sounded exactly alike.

After the meal the master of the house led the guests to the room where the sleeping Tindir Gudrun lay in her icy coffin. The moment Fedma caught a glimpse of her, he knew that she and no other woman must be his wife. She was so beautiful!

Around the coffin there were twenty-four candles burning.

'You know what will happen, if you don't succeed in blowing out the candles in one breath?' asked Hormond of one of the twins, though he didn't know for sure which was the right one.

'Yes, I know,' replied Rojeo.

'Not only you, but your brother, too, will be transformed into icicles if you don't succeed.'

'And if I do,' returned Rojeo, 'will you let us both go, and your sister?'

'Yes,' promised Hormond.

'Very well!' And Rojeo stepped a couple of paces back from the coffin and took in a deep breath. The flames wavered. Then Rojeo blew a mighty blast, and in an instant all the candles were snuffed, the coffin shivered on its stand, slithered to the floor, turned over and broke into a thousand icy splinters. While Hormond looked on, amazed, Rojeo and Fedma swiftly changed places, so that Fedma was standing by the coffin and Rojeo was behind him.

Beautiful Tindir Gudrun rose from the ground and her eyes flashed with anger.

'Who dared break my couch?' she cried, in a clear icy voice.

Fedma went up to her. 'I did, my lovely Tindir Gudrun,' he said. 'But I apologise for breaking the coffin. It happened quite by accident.'

Now, in fact, Rojeo had not broken the coffin by accident. He knew only too well that Gudrun's magic powers were embodied in it. He also noticed that on getting up from the ground, Tindir picked up some of the splinters of the coffin. Fedma, however, was noticing nothing but the beautiful girl. He said to her, 'I've fulfilled your condition; now you will be my wife.'

'I see I have no alternative,' she replied coldly. 'Wait here for me a moment, I must prepare for the journey.' And she turned her back on them and left the room.

Hormond didn't look nearly so calm now as he had done earlier. 'I promised, if the condition would be fulfilled, that you could leave with my sister, and I will keep my word,' he said morosely. 'But you'd better hurry up. If you dawdle too long, you might meet with an accident — which would be none of my doing.' So saying, he hurried away.

'I don't like the look of things,' whispered Rojeo. 'It's time we got away from here.'

'How lovely she is,' sighed Fedma, not listening at all to what his friend was saying.

'They're as slippery as snakes,' whispered Rojeo.

At that moment the door opened and the girl came back. In her hand she had a small satchel.

'Which of you is to be my husband?' she asked unkindly.

'I am,' replied Fedma, wanting to take her hand, but she pulled it back.

'And who is the other fellow?' she asked gruffly. 'How am I to know you one from the other?'

'The one who loves you am I,' replied Fedma warmly, 'and according to that you will be able to identify me from my brother Rojeo. I am Fedma.'

Out in the courtyard Rojeo mounted his horse, Fedma placed his bride in front of him on his saddle, and they rode off. As they rode through the alley of human icicles, Fedma asked his wife, 'Why don't you bring these poor people back to life? Please do so, I beg of you.'

'I cannot,' said Tindir Gudrun. 'You broke my coffin and thus destroyed my magic powers. Now I am just an ordinary mortal like you.'

They rode swiftly away from the Ice Mountain and hastened to the frontiers of the Land of the Swedes. Towards evening they reached a dark forest. Rojeo proposed that they spend the night there, so they made a camp. The men collected wood and lit a fire, and Fedma asked his wife to prepare supper. But Tindir shook her head! 'I mustn't come near the fire,' she said morosely, and sat as far away from it as possible, untied her satchel, picked out a piece of ice from it and sucked it.

Rojeo went to find water, so that they could cook some soup. But he returned empty-handed. There was no stream or spring anywhere near. When he noticed that Tindir was sucking a piece of ice, he said to her, 'Give us some ice, too; melt it in a pot and we'll have some water that way.'

'I haven't any left,' answered Tindir, hastily swallowing her own piece.

So they had to settle to rest without food. Rojeo kept watch, while Tindir and his wife wrapped themselves in covers and lay down on the ground. When Fedma embraced his wife, he shivered. The touch of her skin was as freezing cold as the touch of ice. He saw that she had her satchel under her head and he wanted to put it to one side. She got very angry, however.

'If you want to remain on good terms with me,' she said irately, 'then please leave my things alone!' So he gave her back her satchel, being very anxious that she should be nice to him. Even though she behaved so icily towards him, he loved her more and more all the time, and he hoped that with time she would change.

When Fedma and his wife had fallen asleep, Rojeo crept up to them and cautiously felt under Gudrun's head. He suspected that she had been lying when she said she had no more ice, and he wanted to make sure. And indeed, he could feel the cold splinters of ice in her bag. He took one and, as he was thirsty, swallowed it. Then he quietly stole back to his own place. After a while it seemed to him he could hear voices somewhere near. They seemed to come from the top of the tree. Rojeo listened hard and then he heard, quite clearly, someone saying, 'If the two men knew that in the morning, when they enter the forest, death awaits them, they would certainly choose to skirt it.'

'Shsh, not so loud, old chap,' said a second voice warningly. 'Suppose it occurred to one or other of them to eat a piece of Gudrun's ice from the coffin — he might understand us.'

'Even if that had happened,' said a third voice, 'and the one on guard understands us, he mustn't betray the fact to his friend, or he will be turned to ice himself, right up to his knees.'

A moment later there was a flapping of great big wings and Rojeo saw three enormous black ravens fly off from the top of the tree.

In the morning, when the friends were once again mounted on horseback and Fedma was making for the forest, Rojeo restrained him, saying, 'Don't let's ride into this forest; let's skirt it instead.'

'Why,' asked Fedma, somewhat surprised.

'I don't like the look of it,' replied Rojeo evasively. So they skirted the forest and rode on the whole day, till towards evening they came to a broad river. They decided they would stop there for the night and only ford the river in the morning. The ford was not far away. They made a fire, and this time there was sufficient water for soup. The men ate it, but Gudrun refused hot food.

That night it should have been Fedma's turn to be on guard, but Rojeo proclaimed that he was not a bit tired and would gladly stand guard a second time. Fedma was only too pleased and settled down beside his wife again. This time it seemed to him she was not quite so cold as she had been the previous evening. He tried to warm her with his breath.

The moment the two had fallen asleep, Rojeo crept quietly up to them and again pulled out a piece of Gudrun's ice from the satchel under her head. He had hardly swallowed it, before he could hear the same voices as on the previous evening.

'If the men knew that in the morning, as soon as they enter the ford, the river will flood and drown them,' said the first voice, 'they would surely prefer to cross elsewhere.'

'Quieter!' reminded the second voice. 'Suppose the one who is watching has swallowed a chip of Gudrun's coffin and understands us.'

'So what!' said the third. 'If he betrays the fact to his friend, he will be turned to ice right up to his waist.' At that moment Rojeo again heard the sound of birds flying off and saw that it was the same three ravens he had seen the previous evening.

Next morning, when Fedma started towards the river, Rojeo stopped him. 'Don't let's take this ford,' he said. 'Let's go farther down stream and ford it at a different place.'

Fedma wouldn't hear of it at first; he gladly would have had the river behind him, but seeing that his friend was adamant, he agreed, and they rode on along beside the river.

The following day they crossed the frontiers of the Land of the Swedes and covered the rest of the journey without mishap. When they reached Fedma's estate, the master of the house offered his friend the best room he had and said, 'I would gladly offer you hospitality in my house for the rest of your days for the sake of all that you have done for me.' Rojeo accepted his friend's offer gratefully.

A year passed and Tindir Gudrun presented her husband with a fine healthy baby boy. Fedma was delighted, and he invited guests to celebrate the birth of his first child. They all drank the health of the newborn one — all except Rojeo, who never drank wine so as not to weaken his strength. Instead, he wandered outside into the garden. He was walking under the trees, when suddenly he heard familiar voices:

'If the one who is celebrating the birth of his newborn son knew that at midnight tonight Hormond is sending a giant bird here to steal the child, he wouldn't be feeling so joyful,' croaked the first raven.

'Quietly . . ,' reminded the second. 'The fellow walking down below may have eaten a piece of Gudrun's ice. He has already twice thwarted Hormond's evil intentions. He might do so again today and warn his friend.'

'If he did,' croaked the third raven, 'he would become frozen all over.'

A moment later Rojeo saw three great black birds take to flight above his head.

He returned to the house and went to his room, where his long, sharp sword hung on the wall. He girded it and softly crept to the door of the room where the mother and child were sleeping. Meanwhile the guests had left and the whole house was lost in sleep. Rojeo knocked softly on the door.

'Is that you, Fedma?' asked Gudrun from within.

'Yes,' replied Rojeo. The woman opened the door and went back to her bed. Rojeo lay down beside her, first placing his sword between the woman and himself.

'What are you doing?' asked Gudrun curiously. 'Why do you put the sword between us?'

'I have a good reason,' replied Rojeo. And he turned his back on the woman and pretended to fall asleep. But he wasn't sleeping. He was keeping good watch. After a while, when he saw that Gudrun herself was asleep, he rose quietly and stood with drawn sword beside the window.

Precisely on the stroke of midnight the window flew open and a large black bird alighted on the window-sill. Rojeo lifted his sword and with one blow smote off the bird's head. The black head rolled into the room, but the bird's body fell back down into the garden. Rojeo picked up the bleeding head and flung it out of the window.

Everything had taken place very quietly, and Gudrun had not awakened. Rojeo wanted to leave by now, but as he went past the bed, he noticed that there were a few drops of blood on her face. Probably they had bespattered her when he cut off the bird's head. He wanted to wipe the blood away, so that she wouldn't get a shock when she awoke and looked in the glass. But then he noticed that he himself had his hand smeared with the bird's blood, too. As he didn't want to wake her, he bent over her and lightly licked her face with the tip of his tongue. At that moment the woman roused. When she saw

the man's face bending over her, she thought it was Fedma, wanting to kiss her. She smiled and put her arms round his neck, but Rojeo broke away from her and sprang back.

'What's the matter?' asked Gudrun, somewhat taken aback. Suddenly she noticed the blood on his arm and she cried out in alarm. Her cry was so loud, that it roused Fedma, who was sleeping in the room next door. Fedma jumped up and ran into his wife's room.

'What has happened?' Then he saw his friend, Rojeo, standing beside his wife's bed with a sword in his hand.

'You wanted to kill my wife,' cried Fedma, and he sprang at him. Rojeo easily shook him off and said, 'Don't talk nonsense! Why should I want to kill her?'

The frightened Gudrun sat up in her bed and said, 'He didn't want to kill me, but he found his way into my room, pretending to be you. I didn't recognise him, because you are both so alike. And he — wanted to kiss me.'

'That's not true . . .' muttered Rojeo.

'It is,' insisted the woman. 'I woke up just as he was leaning to kiss me. He has blood on his hands. That's why I cried out.' Suddenly she jumped out of bed and ran over to the cradle, crying desperately, 'He's killed our child!' Fedma also rushed to the cradle. But the child was sleeping soundly, and breathing quietly. When Gudrun picked it up, it started crying a bit.

'How could you possibly think I could dream of harming any of you?' said Rojeo reproachfully. 'Just look out of the window! There is the head of the bird which tried to steal your child during the night. It was sent by Hormond, to get his revenge on you for taking his sister. I killed the bird, so as to save the child. That's why my clothes and my hands are smeared with blood.'

Fedma looked out of the window and saw that his friend was not lying. He embraced him and thanked him fervently. A moment later, however, he asked him, 'How did you discover that the child was in danger?'

'I just had a foreboding,' replied Rojeo evasively. Fedma noticed his embarrassment. 'Why didn't you tell me, instead of coming to my wife's room, pretending you were me?'

'That I may not reveal to you,' said Rojeo morosely, and Fedma could get no more out of him, however much he asked.

From that time on the friendship between the two men was not so firm as it had been, and Fedma began to have less confidence in Rojeo. From the very beginning Gudrun had not liked her husband's friend. As time had passed, she had really begun to love Fedma, and she was unhappy when he spent time with his friend which he might have spent with her. Now she began to tease Fedma about him. Fedma would get quite angry and want to send his friend away from the house, but just in time he would remember all the good Rojeo had done for him, and how, if it hadn't been for his help, he would never have won Gudrun at all. And besides, he couldn't turn him away if he had once offered him hospitality to the end of his days.

One day, when his wife was once more trying to persuade him to drive his friend away, with the excuse that Rojeo was paying too much attention to her, Fedma exclaimed, 'I don't believe it! If he had wanted you, Rojeo could have won you for himself; he could have done so long before me. He was at the Ice Mountain and saw you before I did. It was he who led me there and he blew out the candles — not I.'

'What was that you were saying?' exclaimed Gudrun, amazed. 'It wasn't you who blew out the candles, it was Rojeo?'

Fedma saw he had committed a blunder, that he had betrayed a secret, but he couldn't call back his words.

'Yes, it was he,' he said softly, 'but he didn't want to marry you, because in that case he would have been stripped of his tremendous strength.'

Gudrun paled with anger, but uttered not a word; then she turned and left the room. From that moment on, she hated Rojeo even more than before. He had seen her beauty and had not wished to marry her! He had fulfilled the task which hundreds of other men before him had failed to do, but he had abandoned her, Gudrun, in favour of his friend! He had scorned her! Gudrun would never forgive him that.

Later, Fedma regretted not having held his peace. His wife, from the moment he told her who had snuffed out the candles round her ice coffin, cooled towards him. The splinters of ice which Gudrun had brought in her satchel from the Ice Palace had melted long ago. It had looked as though the warmth of Fedma's love had also melted Gudrun's heart, the heart which at first had seemed so icy. Now, however, it was growing as cold again as when she had first crossed the threshold of Fedma's house.

In the end, Fedma could stand his wife's indifferent behaviour no longer. He saw that he wouldn't placate her with anything less than driving his friend out of the house. But he didn't have the courage to ask him to leave. He merely had less and less to do with him, and finally, whenever they met accidentally, he would turn his head the other way so that they had no need to greet one another.

Rojeo was well aware of all this and he was saddened by it. He saw that his presence was not agreeable to his friend. So one day he made up his mind and went to see him.

'I see, brother,' he said sadly, 'that I upset you. I don't want to burden you any longer with my presence; I just want to take my leave of you before I go.'

Fedma could scarcely disguise his delight at Rojeo's words. He said, 'I won't detain you, if you don't like it here. But I wouldn't like you to feel we had parted on bad terms. I'll give you money and you can take the best horse you can find in the stables.'

'Thank you, I'd like to take a horse, but I don't want money,' replied Rojeo. The friends shook hands, and he departed.

Rojeo had nowhere to go in the world, so he rode where whim carried him. One evening he camped under a bushy tree. He had rolled up in his blankets and was trying to sleep, when suddenly he heard the familiar ravens croaking overhead.

'There lies the fellow who was so miserably rewarded by his friend,' croaked the first raven. 'That's what he got for serving him so faithfully and not thinking of himself. Now he hasn't even a roof over his head.'

'If only he knew how easily he could become a rich man and have far more than his treacherous friend!' croaked the second. 'He could seek out Hormond, even though he's the strongest of the strong and has so far never been overcome by any other man. Hormond is strong simply because no one knows what we know! Just think! Hormond strips himself of all his strength every evening and transfers it to the towel he uses for drying his hands after washing! Oh, ho, ho!' he croaked.

'Not so much noise!' warned the third. 'Supposing he understood? Don't you remember that it was this very fellow who killed the great bird, our brother, shortly after we had been talking about kidnapping Fedma's child?'

The third raven's warning so upset the others, that they all took to their wings and were gone. But Rojeo now knew the goal to aim for.

In the morning he mounted his horse and went straight to the Ice Mountain. He rode up it and right into the courtyard of the Ice Palace. And in no time there was Hormond standing beside him.

'What do you want?' he asked menacingly. 'My sister is no longer here and I don't receive visitors.'

'Then you don't recognise me?' interrupted Rojeo with a smile. Hormond looked at him more carefully and recognised him.

'Why, surely you are one of the two who carried off my sister!' he cried. 'Woebetide you! I'll not let you get away from here alive!' Hormond drew his sword, wanting to strike Rojeo. But the latter skilfully avoided the blow and said, 'Don't get excited, Hormond, victor of all victors! I come as a friend. I want to work out a joint revenge with you on the man who carried off your sister. I know you hate him, probably almost as much as I do. But so far all the traps you have set for him have come to nought. I want to advise you how you could get the better of him.'

Hormond was surprised, and his face still showed suspicion. 'Why do you hate the man who carried off my sister?' he asked. 'Surely you are his brother, aren't you?'

'I was his brother and his friend, now I am his enemy, because he betrayed me and kicked me out like a dog, when he no longer needed me,' replied Rojeo. Then he told Hormond how he had had to leave the house where he had been promised hospitality to the end of his days. Hormond heard him out and then said, 'Yes, I can well believe we now have a common enemy and that we are allies. Come into my house and rest. In the morning we'll work out a plan for destroying your brother.'

He led his guest into the house and offered him a cold supper. Then he showed him a room where a bed had been prepared. He wished Rojeo goodnight and was about to leave. Rojeo, however, said, 'I am very dusty from my travels. I would like to have a wash before I settle to sleep.'

'The bathroom is across the passage,' replied Hormond, 'but there is only cold water.'

'That's no matter,' laughed Rojeo. 'Anyway, you wash first, as I would like to rest a moment before I bathe.'

So Hormond went off and Rojeo lay down on his bed fully dressed and waited. After a while he heard heavy steps going down the passage. The giant had left the bathroom. Rojeo got up, opened the door quietly and, seeing no one, entered the bathroom. There

was a large bath there, filled to the top with water. The master of the house had prepared the water for his guest. Over the edge of the bath was a snow-white towel — certainly not the one used by the giant. Rojeo looked round, and in the corner he saw a towel which was so dirty it might have been used for years by hundreds of people and never been washed. That must be the towel into which Hormond transfers all his strength at night, he thought.

Rojeo quickly undressed, but didn't get into the icy water. He just rubbed his body thoroughly all over with the dirty towel. Then he let the water out of the bath, picked up his clothes and returned to his room, where he slept soundly till the morning.

At dawn Hormond woke him, offered him an icy breakfast, and they walked outside to discuss their revenge. During their walk he came to a spot where the steep icy mountain slope fell away at an almost perpendicular angle. Here Rojeo halted and said, 'Hormond, I hear you are a very strong man — in fact, the strongest of the strong. They say no one has ever beaten you yet. I've never been beaten in wrestling with a man either. What do you say to testing our strength against each other?'

'Why not?' laughed the giant. 'It can't hurt to have a little exercise first thing in the morning.' He seized Rojeo by the waist, wanting to throw him to the ground. But what had happened? His arms were quite weak. Rojeo stood there with his legs astride, Hormond couldn't even move him.

'Now I'll try,' said Rojeo. He seized the giant by the waist, lifted him into the air as though he were a small rabbit and threw him from the top of the Ice Mountain. Hormond hurtled down the icy precipice and was killed. Rojeo wanted to return to the icy palace, but at that moment he noticed that all the ice blocks in the form of people and horses were beginning to move. Suddenly they were no longer icicles and icy rocks, but people and horses! With Hormond's death, the spell had been broken and all those who had at one time or other tried to win lovely Gudrun's hand had come back to life, and so had their animals. The entire throng of young gallants was hastening towards him, and all wanted to shake him by the hand and thank him for liberating them. Finally, he went back into the palace and filled his pockets with gold, silver and precious stones — there was an immense treasure chest there. When he had collected as much as he could carry, he mounted his horse and rode away.

In the first city he came to, Rojeo bought himself a splendid carriage, also another horse to make a pair and fitted himself out with magnificent garments. Then he rode home. Shortly before he reached the borders of the country, he was overtaken by another handsome carriage. In it sat the young princess who had formerly wanted to marry Fedma, and who, when he had refused her, had journeyed out into the world again so as to forget him. Now she was returning after a long absence, knowing nothing of what

had been happening. Rojeo noticed the lady was in a hurry and, as the road was narrow, he drew to one side and let her pass. The princess looked at him, wanting to thank him, and on seeing him and thinking he was Fedma, she called out scornfully, 'Well, Fedma, you old icicle! Did you find your icy bride?'

Rojeo looked at the woman in astonishment — and was much taken with her. Being exhilarated by having overcome Hormond and having acquired a fortune, he sprang from his carriage, opened the door of the lady's carriage, bent over her and kissed her.

'A woman who dares call me, Rojeo Sandor, a frozen icicle, has to be punished!' he cried gaily. The princess looked somewhat abashed, but wasn't really cross. When Rojeo had explained who he was, she invited him to her castle and offered him hospitality for as long as he would care to stay. As Rojeo had now fallen well and truly in love with her, and as he had acquired Hormond's strength, the strength of one who had been the strongest of the strong, he thought that he could afford to marry without fear that his wife would strip him of all his strength. He asked for the princess's hand and soon they were married. Meanwhile the princess's father had died, and Rojeo thus became the ruler of the country.

One day Rojeo decided he would visit his former friend, Fedma. In his splendid carriage, drawn by two noble steeds, and dressed in fine silk and velvet, he drove into Fedma's courtyard. He had himself announced as the prince that he was, and Fedma came running out to welcome this distinguished visitor. Imagine his surprise when he recognised Rojeo!

'Is that you, Rojeo?' he exclaimed in amazement. 'They told me it was our new prince who had arrived!'

'But I am your new prince,' replied Rojeo. Whereupon Fedma fell at his feet and begged his forgiveness. Rojeo helped him up, embraced him and said, 'I forgave you long ago, Fedma. I married the princess. I am happy and I wish you happiness too, from the very bottom of my heart. Let's shake hands and be friends again, the way we originally promised one another!'

Fedma wept for joy. He embraced his friend, and Fedma began telling Rojeo how deeply he had regretted driving him from his home at his wife's request. Gudrun apparently had also completely changed. At a certain moment she had suddenly become a different person altogether.

'When was that?' inquired Rojeo. 'When I left?'

'No,' replied Fedma. 'The change came much later, about three months after your departure.'

'That, I suppose, was when I killed Hormond,' nodded Rojeo, and he began telling

his friend what had happened. It was a long story and Rojeo told it right from the start in detail; and in his delight at having found his old friend again, he forgot that he was not allowed to speak about the ravens. When it came to the moment where he listened to them talking about the towel in which the giant put away his strength for the night, Fedma asked, 'Since when have you understood raven's language?' Whereupon Rojeo had to explain how he had eaten a piece of Gudrun's ice from her satchel when they first rode away from the Ice Mountain, and how he had not wanted to ride into the wood and later cross the river, because he had heard the ravens' warnings. And as he had completely forgotten what the ravens had threatened, he revealed to his friend what they had said; he also told him what they had said on the day of the birth of Fedma's child. It was only when Fedma exclaimed, 'Then why didn't you tell me how you knew that the great bird had wanted to steal my child?' that Rojeo suddenly remembered that he shouldn't have revealed it. But it was too late. He felt how an icy chill was spreading all over his body from the legs up.

Suddenly there was a noisy croaking above the heads of the two friends. Rojeo, who by now was frozen up to his knees, again heard the familiar voices. He looked up and saw three ravens circling above him, one of which croaked out, 'Woe betide you! You've betrayed us to your friend! Woe betide you!'

The icy cold had now seized Rojeo up to the waist.

'Woe betide you!' croaked the second raven, circling over Rojeo's head. 'You're frozen to the waist. And now, you'll freeze all over, because you betrayed us to your friend! You'll be turned into an ice block!'

And Rojeo could really feel how his whole body was turning to ice, it was stiffening higher and higher, right up to his shoulders . . .

Suddenly, however, the third raven flew quite low, close to Rojeo's head, and croaked softly into his ear, 'If your friend, who once betrayed you, were to spatter you with the blood of his child, he could save you. But he won't; he'll never do it!' The last of the ravens flew aloft, circled over the heads of the two friends for the last time and disappeared into the clouds.

Fedma had also heard the ravens' croaking, but he had not understood what they said. However, he had noticed only too well his friend's sudden pallor and he cried out, 'What's the matter; what has happened to you? Why are you so stiff?'

'It's the end of me,' sighed Rojeo. 'I betrayed to you what I should have kept to myself till the end of my days. Now I am to be turned into an ice block . . .'

'Can't I help you in any way?'

'Yes, you could, if you would spatter me with some of the blood of your son, but you'll never do it . . .' said Rojeo softly. He had spoken these words with the greatest

difficulty because the icy chill had now seized his neck and chin, and he could scarcely move his lips. By the time he'd finished speaking, he was completely frozen.

Fedma cast a horrified glance at him, and, seeing that his friend was indeed quite motionless and that his body was covered with a fine coating of frost, he turned and ran into the house. He rushed into the room where his wife was playing with the child. Beside her was a sewing basket and Gudrun had a thimble on her finger, for she was just making the child some clothes. She looked up at her husband in bewilderment, for he seized the child and pulled a knife out of his pocket.

'What are you doing?' she cried.

'I have to save my friend's life,' answered Fedma. He opened the knife and scratched his child's hand with the blade. The little fellow began to cry. Gudrun screamed and seized the knife from her husband's hand. 'Have you gone mad?' she shouted angrily. 'How do you dare to treat your child so cruelly?' But Fedma quickly snatched the golden thimble from her finger, caught some drops of blood from the wound on the child's hand, and ran out. He spattered the blood from the thimble over the ice block into which his friend had been transformed — and lo! Hardly had the drops touched the ice, when the frosty covering began to melt, the rock moved — and there was Rojeo standing before him, as well and strong as before.

'Oh, my friend,' he cried, 'so you really didn't hesitate to sacrifice the blood of your child to save me!'

The friends fell into each other's arms.

And thus Fedma made good the way he had betrayed his friend, the friend whom he had once driven from his home after promising him hospitality to the end of his days. From that time on, nothing clouded their friendship — not the slightest shadow of lack of confidence. And Fedma, Rojeo and their wives and children lived together in peace and contentment to the end of their days.

The Beautiful Sorceress

Once upon a time there was an old gypsy woman and she had a beautiful young daughter, who was a sorceress.

Now sorcery is not a trade which one can learn, like the blacksmith's or the brazier's; one has to be born a magician or sorceress. One can recognise the fact the moment the child comes into the world. If a boy is born with a full set of teeth — then he's a magician. If a girl comes into the world with a bump on the head — they call it a hood — then she is a sorceress.

The parents of such children must preserve strict silence about the fact; otherwise the child loses its magic powers.

The gypsy woman who gave birth to this daughter with a 'hood' knew exactly what it meant. She told no one about it and so long as the child was small she kept its head covered with a kerchief. When the girl grew bigger, she had such long thick hair, that the bump was well hidden by it. Otherwise she was a beautiful, lively, and to all appearances charming little girl, and people were fond of her.

When the girl was sixteen, she fell in love with a young gypsy lad, a blacksmith. He was terribly poor, but otherwise handsome and good-looking. The old gypsy woman was none too pleased with her daughter's choice; she would have preferred her to do better, but when she saw that the daughter had no intention of changing her mind, she gave way. What was worse, however, the young blacksmith himself couldn't have cared less for the one who had given him her heart. He was a madcap, had fun with everyone and wanted to marry a girl who would bring him a good dowry.

The lovesick girl was very miserable, and at last she made up her mind to cast a spell on him. She killed a black chicken and smeared the door of her chamber with the chicken fat. Then she cut her nightshirt into three equally long strips, tied them together and hooked it all over the hinge of the door. She bought nine brand new pins at the shop, made eight knots in the strips tied together and into each knot stuck a pin, all the while holding the last one in her mouth and muttering the blacksmith's name. Then she let the entire strip of material twist up into a skein and tied one end to the leg of her bed. Into this last knot she thrust the pin she had held in her mouth, and then she lay down on the bed. As soon as the weight of her body forced the ninth pin deeper into the ninth knot,

the young blacksmith felt the prick at his heart. He was not at home at the time — he was out courting the village mayor's daughter. The blacksmith was quite attracted by this girl, but the moment the pin pressed into the knot in the sorceress's nightshirt, the young fellow lost all interest in his wealthy bride-to-be, hastily bade her goodbye and left. He made straight for the dilapidated hut belonging to the old gypsy. He had no idea why he had done so, but all of a sudden he found himself knocking at its door. The young sorceress, who had been impatiently waiting for him, opened immediately . . . and in a short while there was a wedding.

The blacksmith had no idea that his wife had cast a spell on him and loved her dearly. But as each year passed and another child was born, he began to worry as to how he would keep them all. After the birth of the fifth child, he told his wife that it would have to stop, but she just smiled and said it didn't trouble her in the least. And true enough. After each child his wife seemed to get younger and younger and more beautiful.

This seemed odd to the blacksmith and he confided in his mother. She pondered a moment, and then said, 'A woman who gives birth to a child each year and who gets younger and more beautiful each time is not an ordinary mortal; she must be a sorceress. Watch her carefully and see what she does when the moon is full!'

So the blacksmith waited till the coming of the full moon. One moonlit night he pretended to be asleep and watched his wife. Beneath half-closed eyes he saw how she got up and came and bent over him, listening to his breathing. So he began snoring loudly. The woman then went to the fireplace, threw a handful of twigs on to it, lit a fire and went out. After a moment she returned, carrying some kind of herbs. These she threw into the cauldron hanging over the fire in which she had already boiled some water, and while doing so, she muttered softly . . . .

The following day, when the blacksmith told his mother what he had seen that night, the old woman was very upset and said, 'Your wife is certainly a sorceress. You must kill her!'

'But I can't destroy the mother of my five children,' objected the blacksmith woefully.

'You'll have to,' said his mother. 'Sorceresses are evil weeds that must be pulled out, roots and all, otherwise they grow again. The only way to get rid of a sorceress is to burn her.'

'No, I certainly can't do that,' said the blacksmith.

'But you must; there's no alternative,' insisted his mother. 'If you remain with her, you'll lose your soul, and the souls of your children will descend into Hell. But if cleansing fire exorcises the sorceress's body, which belongs to the devil, the spirit, which belongs to God, will be saved.'

The blacksmith's mother went on at him so long, that finally she prevailed on him

and he promised to do as she had bid. He went home, searched for a hemp rope, threw one end of it over a branch of a tree and lit a bonfire under the tree. His wife, amused, watched him from the window. After a while, she came out and asked him what he was doing.

'Come here a moment,' he said, not looking at her. He knew that if he had looked at her, he would not have been able to do what he intended. His wife laughingly obeyed. The blacksmith made a loop at the end of the rope and threw it round his wife's neck. She was still amused. 'Is this a game, or something?' she asked.

'No, it's not,' replied the blacksmith. 'I've got to burn you, so as to save our children, myself and your soul, because you're a sorceress.'

'Don't talk nonsense, you fool, and hurry up and put out that fire!' cried the woman. But the blacksmith hastily threw more logs onto the blaze and, choking back his tears, ran into the house, locking himself and his children in, so that they would know nothing of it.

When the woman's skirt caught fire, the sorceress just made a wry face and hissed, 'Just you wait, you'll not get away with this!' Then she began mumbling some magic words. Suddenly her body vanished and in its place, high above the fire, but still tied to the rope, hung a beautiful red rose. At that moment a rich squire came riding by. He was an elderly man, a widower, and as he rode up to the tree, he noticed the rose and stretched out his hand for it. 'Since when have roses grown on trees?' he wondered. He stuck the flower in his hat and rode home.

Back at home the squire said to his housekeeper, 'Put this rose in water and set it on the table in my room!' At noon, when the housekeeper brought him his dinner, the squire ate his fill, then stretched out on the couch and fell asleep. The moment this had happened, the rose sprang out of the vase and changed into the form of a beautiful young woman. She immediately started on the remains of the squire's dinner. There had been plenty prepared, though the master never ate all that his housekeeper cooked for him. She was accustomed to this and usually made good use of what was left over from the master's table. This day, however, when she came to clear the things away, she noticed that for once there was no food left. The plates and bowls were completely empty, not a crumb anywhere, just bare bones, and the plates as clean as though they had been washed.

The following day the housekeeper prepared an even more plentiful dinner for her master. But not even this time did she find anything left over. She shook her head in wonder. And when the same thing happened a third time, the housekeeper decided there must be more to it than met the eye, and she made up her mind she would find out what it was. The following day, when she had laid dinner for her master, she didn't leave the room, but hid behind the curtains. Through a chink she watched him eat. He ate very

little, hardly more than a taste of each dish. Then he stretched out on the couch and went to sleep.

Suddenly the red rose sprang out of the vase on the table and hopped to the ground. The moment it touched the floor, it turned into a beautiful young woman, who greedily set to eating the remains of the master's dinner! When she had eaten every smallest bit, she sprang up on the table — and hop! — back into the vase. Once again she had become a flower.

So that's how it was, thought the housekeeper. She ran from her hiding place, angrily tore the rose from the vase, wanting to throw it out of the window. But at that moment the squire woke up and asked her in amazement what she was doing. The woman had to tell the truth. She told him what she had seen. But the squire just laughed at her.

'You fell asleep and had a dream!'

'Well, see for yourself!' said the housekeeper.

'Certainly,' agreed the squire. 'Tomorrow I'll see for myself.'

The next day the squire stretched out on the couch as usual after dinner, but didn't go to sleep. He just pretended to, and through half-closed eyes watched to see what would happen. And see something he did, to be sure! The rose really did spring from the vase and turn into a beautiful woman, who began eating up the remains of his dinner! When she was thoroughly busy, the squire jumped up and caught her by the arms from behind. She tried to break loose, twisting and turning like a snake, but he held fast and wouldn't let her go. While struggling vainly to get away, her long black locks got twisted round his wrists. Suddenly she stopped struggling and broke into tears.

'Let go my hair, please,' she sobbed, 'it hurts!'

'I'll let go,' he said, 'but only if you promise me you'll never change back into being a rose and will remain with me as my wife.'

At first she didn't want to, but when he started pulling her hair again, she submitted, and promised she'd stay with him.

The old squire wanted the beautiful girl to be happy in his home, so he spoiled her and anticipated her desires. He bought her lovely clothes and jewels and tried to fulfil her every wish. And this of course was not to the liking of the housekeeper. The young lady soon discovered that the servant was cheating them. She also remembered only too well that the housekeeper had wanted to throw her out of the window, when she was still a rose. She paid her back in every way she could, till the housekeeper could stand it no longer and gave notice.

The servant left, but swore she would have her revenge. Knowing that an old gypsy sorceress lived in the woods she killed a duck, put three-score eggs in a basket and went off to find her. She presented the gift to the sorceress and asked her advice as to how she

could have her revenge on the woman who had deprived her of her job. When she had finished her tale, the old gypsy woman said, 'Yes, the squire's wife is a sorceress. She was born with a bump on the back of her head. All her power lies in the hair which grows from this bump. If someone were to cut it off, she would lose her magic powers and be like any other mortal.'

The housekeeper thanked her for the advice and went home, wondering how she could rid the squire's wife of her powers.

One day the young squire's wife thought she would like to go for a ride in the country. The squire had the horses harnessed to the carriage and they rode off. As they drove past the smithy, the woman asked her husband to halt. In front of it five dirty, half-naked children were playing in the puddles. When the woman saw them, she jumped down, ran to them and began kissing and embracing them and, disregarding the fact that they dirtied her clothes, she fondled them lovingly. The children didn't recognise the beautiful

woman as their mother, but they were not afraid of her. They caught her by her skirt and shrieked with delight when she pulled out a bag of sweets and began sharing them round.

The blacksmith heard the shouts and came out of the smithy to see what was happening. Not even he recognised his wife.

'Are these your children, blacksmith?' asked the lady. When he nodded, she asked again, 'Where is their mother?'

'She died,' replied the blacksmith.

'Well, you should be ashamed of letting your children run around so dirty and in rags,' said the squire's wife disapprovingly. 'And poor little things, they're so thin! Do you give them enough to eat?'

'I'm only a poor blacksmith; how am I to feed them properly?' sighed the father.

'Come to our manor tomorrow, and I'll give you work to do. I have an iron railing round the garden which needs mending. If you'll do it, I'll pay you well. Here's something in advance.' The woman handed the blacksmith a purse of money. 'But I warn you! Mind you use it to feed and clothe the children properly, and don't go and drink it away.'

The blacksmith assured her that he would not drink the money away and thanked her respectfully. The lady then got back into the carriage and drove off with her husband.

The following day, when the blacksmith arrived at the manor, the lady calmly told him, 'There's a broken tap in the bathroom; I would like you to mend it for me.' She led him to the bathroom and watched him working. When he had finished, she said, 'You're very dirty; wouldn't you like to wash?'

'I would only be dirtying your bath,' said the blacksmith apologetically.

'Never mind, just use the bath, and in the meanwhile I'll find you some clean clothes and an old suit of my husband's.'

When she had left, the blacksmith undressed, got into the bath and washed. The lady put the clean clothes and a suit outside the door, and she also left him a razor, telling him to shave, too. When he finally emerged from the bathroom, the woman couldn't hold back any longer; she threw her arms round his neck, saying, 'Oh, you handsome fellow! I'll never love anyone in the world as much as you.'

The blacksmith was greatly taken aback. Supposing the squire were to appear now? He pushed the woman away from him and said, 'Have some sense! I'm only a poor gypsy and I have five small children.'

'I know that as well as you do, for they are mine as well as yours,' replied the squire's wife. 'Don't you recognise me? I'm your wife.'

Whereupon the blacksmith looked straight at her, in a way he'd never quite dared to do before, and recognised her. 'However did you get here?' he asked in amazement.

'That's my affair,' she said abruptly. 'I married the squire when you had no more use for me and wanted to be rid of me. But I only did it out of anger and to punish you, I don't love him and I can never forget you. I want to return to you and the children.'

'Well, my girl, it won't be all that easy,' sighed the blacksmith. 'If you run away from the squire, he'll send out to look for you, and if he finds you at the smithy, he'll drive us all away, and then what will we do?'

The blacksmith thought a moment and then added, 'I'm going home now and I'll think it over. Perhaps I'll have a good idea overnight.'

'Very well, but come tomorrow morning for sure, won't you?' said the woman. She brought out all the jewels the squire had bought her and gave them to her husband. She also gave him a pile of fine clothes and some money. She tied everything in a bundle, the blacksmith slung it over his shoulder and went home. On the way he met a beggar. It was the squire's former housekeeper.

'Good day to you, Grandma,' the blacksmith greeted her.

'The same to you, blacksmith. What have you got there?'

'Some old clothes and some food,' replied the blacksmith. 'I've been working up at the manor and they gave me these in reward.'

'If you got those from the squire's wife, beware! She might turn you to stone,' said the beggar. 'She is a sorceress.'

'How do you know?' he asked dubiously.

'I used to work at the manor. I once saw with my own eyes how the squire's wife turned from being a rose into a woman and back again. A pity I didn't manage to get on with them, and that I gave notice. Today I'm wiser and know how to strip the sorceress of her magic powers.'

'Is that really possible?' asked the blacksmith.

'It's quite easy,' replied the woman. 'It's enough to catch the sorceress and cut off the hair that grows from the bump on the back of her head. That's where her magic power lies. If someone were to do that, she would become an ordinary woman, like the rest of us.'

The next day the blacksmith dressed again in his old blacksmith's clothes, found some old used rags that his wife had worn formerly, shoved them into a satchel and went to the manor. He was careful to take some sharp scissors too. The squire's wife saw him coming from afar, watching him from the window. She hastened to open the door.

'Well, what did you think up?'

'Let's go to your room, and I'll tell you,' replied the blacksmith. The squire's wife led him to her room, and the moment they were alone, the blacksmith seized his wife, pulled the scissors out of his pocket — and snip! Off came her hair! A long lock lay in his hand.

'What are you doing?' cried the woman. But the blacksmith just cut again — snip! Another lock of the sorceress's hair lay on the floor. In vain she tried desperately to stop him and twisted in his arms. But he held her firmly with one hand and cut her hair with the other. And as he cut the beautiful tresses off, the woman's face began to change. Her pink cheeks paled and acquired a yellowish tinge. The shining eyes lost their lustre, and at the corner of the reddened lids there appeared a small fan of wrinkles. The red also went from her lips. When the last braid of hair fell to the ground there was no longer a beautiful young girl standing there; in front of the blacksmith stood an ordinary-looking, middle-aged gypsy woman, with her head shaved. But he didn't feel in the least sorry, because that was how a woman should look who had lived many years with him and had given him five children.

The woman glanced at her hands, which were no longer soft and silky, but wrinkled and veined, and with tears in her eyes, she sobbed, 'You've destroyed all my power and all my beauty. I shall not please you any more, now you won't love me . . .'

'I shall love you far more as an ordinary woman than as a sorceress,' said the blacksmith. He opened his satchel, took out her old clothes and told her to change into them. She obeyed without a murmur.

'And now come along. I'll take you home,' said the blacksmith.

They had hardly reached the courtyard, when they met the squire.

'Ah, so it's you, blacksmith,' he said. 'Have you finished mending the railing as my wife requested?'

'Forgive me,' answered the blacksmith, 'but I had to delay the work. I found my wife here among the servants at your manor, she ran away from me a while ago. I'm taking her back home.'

'That's right,' nodded the man. 'Women should never run away from their husbands. Take her back and come again tomorrow instead, so that my wife won't be angry.'

'Yes, sir.' The blacksmith took his wife by the arm and left quickly.

The squire never saw his beautiful wife again. She had vanished as though swallowed up by the earth. He searched for her everywhere, but never found her. In the end he decided she must have run away, because she was bored with living with an older man. He sent a message for his former housekeeper to return and run his house for him as before. She was only too glad to obey.

And the blacksmith was also glad to have his wife back and to have a mother for his children. A year later a sixth child was born at the smithy. This time it did not upset him. By selling the things the squire had given his wife, they had money enough and he was able to feed and clothe his children well. And they lived happily together to the end of their days.

Faithful Lali

It all happened long ago, so long ago that people don't really remember it any more.

There was an old gypsy couple who lived and worked on a farm belonging to a rich non-gypsy. They brought up many children, but all of them left home, so that the old folk had no one left to look after them and make their lives easier.

The mother waited day after day, hoping that one of the children would return, but in vain. After a time, however, she had another child. It was a boy. The parents were delighted with him and called him Leshko. That very day, at the very same hour, a daughter was born to the young wife of the farmer, and she was christened Lali.

Now, if a boy and girl are born at the selfsame hour, the saying is that the two are fated for one another. While the children were small, they used to play together; when they grew older Lali, who was driven the long way to school by carriage, used to invite Leshko to ride there with her. And the buns she took for her snack she used to share with him, too.

One day the farmer's wife said to her husband, 'How is it that Lali eats so many buns every day, and yet never gets fat?' The maid, who was listening, exclaimed, 'How could she, if she gives them to Leshko, when they ride to school together in her carriage.' The farmer was very angry at hearing this and forbade his daughter to have anything to do with his tenant's son.

When the time came for the children to bring back their reports from school, Leshko had all good marks, but Lali had only poor and medium ones. This annoyed her father and he went to see the teacher, 'How is it possible that my daughter has a worse report than the son of my tenant?'

'You see, Lali has not been herself lately,' replied the teacher. 'To start with, she learned her lessons well, like Leshko, but from the moment you forbade her to have anything to do with him, she has seemed absent-minded and sad, and nothing amuses her.'

When the farmer got home, he summoned his tenant and said, 'I don't like the idea of your son going to the same school as my daughter. Take him away from it!'

'But where is he to go?' asked the gypsy in dismay. 'There's no other school anywhere near!'

'That's no matter. What does a gypsy need school for?' sneered the farmer. 'There's work and to spare in my fields, and there the boy is just rubbing his pants shiny on the school bench. From tomorrow he'll spend the day pasturing the cows.'

When the gypsy told his family at home what the farmer was demanding, the gypsy woman burst into tears, but Leshko said, 'Never mind, I know how to read and write. I'll pasture the cows.' The following day he really did go and drive the cows to the fields. When Lali heard what had happened, she asked the coachman to take her to Leshko. She sat down beside him and said, 'If you are not allowed to go to school with me, I'll stay and pasture the cows, too.' Leshko tried vainly to dissuade her, but she wouldn't listen, and she stayed with him in the fields till evening. The second day the same thing happened, and the third. On the fourth day the teacher came to the farm and asked what was the matter with Lali, as she had not been at school. The farmer called the coachman, who admitted where he had taken Lali each day. The farmer was furious and sent a message to his tenant that Leshko must leave the place or else the whole family would be driven off the farm.

When the gypsy brought the message home, the mother started complaining, but Leshko said, 'Don't cry, Mother. I'll go. I'll make my way in the world all right.'

His mother baked him some pancakes for his travels, and Leshko set off. On the way he met the farmer's carriage and Lali was seated in it. When she saw Leshko with a knapsack on his back, she cried out, 'Where are you off to, Leshko?'

'Goodbye, Lali,' he replied. 'I'm off to seek my fortune, at your father's request.'

'I shall wait for you,' cried the girl. 'When I grow up, I'll never marry anyone but you. Don't forget!' At which the coachman cracked his whip and the carriage drove off at high speed.

Leshko wandered on and on, till he reached a broad stream over which there was a long, narrow footbridge. Just as he was about to cross, he noticed an old woman at the other end, driving a large flock of geese before her. 'You'll have to wait,' the old woman shouted to him, 'till I've driven my geese across the bridge.'

Leshko was not in a hurry; he sat down and waited till the old woman had driven them all across. The bridge was very narrow, and the geese had to cross one by one. There was a lot of them. It was getting dark, and there seemed no end to the flock. So Leshko leaned his head against a tree and fell asleep. When he woke up it was already morning, but the geese were still strutting across the bridge. Leshko unwrapped his pack and began eating his pancakes. But there were more and more geese; there seemed a never-ending number.

So Leshko stretched out under the tree and went to sleep again. When he woke up there was not a sign of the geese anywhere; the bridge was clear. But beside him stood

the old woman with a cane in her hand. 'My geese have crossed; now you can go,' she said. 'But admit it; you were cross at having to wait so long!'

'And even if I was,' laughed Leshko. 'I'm not in a hurry. I'm off into the world to seek my fortune.'

'The wise never hurry and the polite don't grumble,' nodded the old woman with satisfaction. 'If you had been impatient and grumbled, it would have gone ill with you. But as you waited so patiently, you will be rewarded.' She raised the cane and gave Leshko a sharp blow across his hand. The lad cried out in surprise.

'That blow will be repaid many times over,' said the old crone. 'From today, whatever work you set your hand to, you'll succeed in doing better than anyone else.' Upon these words she vanished.

Leshko looked at his hand. The palm and wrist were striped with red marks. 'That was an evil old woman,' he thought to himself, and got up and crossed the river. He went on, and by evening came to the gates of a great city. On entering them, he found himself in front of a house with a sign indicating the house of a goldsmith. 'Why not become a goldsmith,' he thought to himself, and he went and knocked on the door. It was opened by the mastersmith himself.

'What do you want, my lad?' he asked him.

'I'd like to be apprenticed as a goldsmith,' replied Leshko.

'And why not,' said the craftsman. 'If you'll be diligent and obedient, you'll do well.' He invited the lad in and gave him some supper. Then he took him to a small chamber to sleep. In the morning he woke him and took him to the workshop, where the young apprentices were working.

'Look what beautiful things my apprentices are making out of gold and silver!' said the master craftsman. 'If you'll be diligent and skilful, you'll do the same in a year's time.' Then he led him to another workshop, where the craftsmen were working. 'If you work hard, in three or four years' time you'll be doing the same,' said the master goldsmith. Finally, he led the new apprentice to his own workshop. 'This is where I work and this is my latest commission.' He showed him the beginnings of a regal crown. 'The king himself ordered it from me. There's no one else in the world who can make a thing like this. Were you to study your whole life long, you couldn't make anything like it.'

'How do you know?' laughed Leshko. 'Entrust me with the job and I'll finish it!'

The master craftsman got very angry. 'I've a good mind to chuck you out,' he said, 'you cheeky good-for-nothing! But I'll shut you in here, and if the crown isn't finished by the evening, I will throw you out!' Upon which words, he locked the lad in the workshop and went away.

Leshko examined the unfinished work. The diamonds and precious stones glittered,

blinding his eyes. He picked one up and tried to see where it would fit best. He felt his hands moving easily of their own accord. Then he picked up a goldsmith's welder, a moment later the pincers, and before he knew where he was — all the precious stones had been set in the gold where they belonged. The crown was finished.

When the master craftsman came in the evening, he couldn't believe his eyes. The object on which he would have had to work for several more weeks was complete and glowed with great beauty. He had to admit that he couldn't have done better himself. He said to the lad, 'If you've managed this alone, without outside help, you are indeed a great artist. Stay with me as a partner and we'll share the money we earn fairly between us.'

Leshko accepted the offer. But the goldsmith was not honest and he didn't keep his word. For instance, he didn't divide fairly the money that he received from the king for the crown; he kept much more for himself than he gave Leshko. But Leshko enjoyed the goldsmith's work. He saved up the money he earned and was delighted at the thought of saving plenty and of taking it back home to help his parents.

After a while, however, he couldn't help noticing that the master was cheating him, and he decided to leave. As he traversed the city, he noticed a sign marking the home of a wood-carver. It wouldn't be at all a bad idea to become a wood-carver, he thought to himself. So he knocked. The wood-carver was glad to accept the lad as his apprentice, and led him in and showed him the workshops. Finally he led him to his own workshop, where there stood an unfinished altar-piece.

'This altar-piece,' he said, 'was ordered by the king himself. He is building a new church, because his daughter has fallen very ill and the priest has told him it may help. No one in the city can carve wood as beautifully as I. Were you to study your whole life long, you'd never produce a work like this.'

'Would you like to test me?' laughed Leshko. 'Let me finish the altar-piece!'

The wood-carver got very angry. 'What's that? You dare to say that you, who have had no apprenticeship time with me yet, could know as much as I? Very well, I'll take you at your word. I'll shut you in here till evening, and woe betide you if the altar-piece is not finished by then.'

He locked the lad in the workshop and went away.

As soon as he was alone, Leshko set to work with a will. He began carving saints and angels from the wood, which looked as though they were alive. He got on like a house on fire. When the statues were ready, he began clothing them in brocades and silk. He cut and sewed and sang to himself as he worked. Then he gilded the arms and legs of the statues — and lo, the altar-piece was finished! While examining with pleasure the work he had done, it seemed to him that one of the golden angels moved a bit. Yes! Suddenly

the angel opened its mouth and spoke, 'You made me very nicely, Leshko. This is one of the best likenesses of me produced by human hands. For that I will reward you. Pass me your knife a moment!'

The amazed Leshko handed the angel the knife with which he had carved the statues. The angel touched the blade with its gilded thumb and returned it to the lad, saying, 'From this moment any dead thing you touch with this knife will be brought back to life.' Then it stiffened again and was like all the other statues.

When the wood-carver returned in the evening and saw the completed altar-piece, he couldn't believe his eyes. 'Who finished this altar-piece?' he exclaimed.

'I did,' replied Leshko. When the master craftsman still refused to believe him, he calmly took a piece of wood and swiftly carved the head of a saint that looked as though it were a living being. Whereupon the master carver begged him to stay with him as a partner, saying he would divide everything they earned fairly between them. Leshko agreed. But when the carver received a splendid fee from the king for the altar-piece, he only gave Leshko a small part of it and kept the rest for himself.

Meanwhile the king had the church built and the beautiful altar-piece was installed, but in spite of it, the princess, whom this praiseworthy act was supposed to cure, suddenly died. The king called in the priest who had advised him, and began blaspheming and even threatening to have the church pulled down. The priest took fright and said, 'The fact that the heavens did not listen to your prayer must surely be the fault of the wood-carver who carved the altar-piece.'

So the wood-carver was summoned, and when he arrived, the king spoke to him harshly, saying, 'The priest maintains that the heavens did not listen to my prayer, because you are an unworthy person and you have profaned a holy place with your work.'

The frightened wood-carver was at such a loss that he revealed to the king that he had not carved the altar-piece himself, saying that it had been the work of his partner, a gypsy. The king summoned Leshko to be brought before him.

'Was it you who carved the altar-piece for the new church?' he asked. When the lad admitted that it was, the king asked whether he was a good Christian.

'Both my parents and I are Christians,' replied Leshko.

'Either you and the wood-carver are lying or else the priest is,' sighed the king. 'I'll have you all three executed, and that will be that.' Whereupon Leshko said, 'I have heard that the dead princess is very beautiful. Would you permit me to look at her once for a moment; then I will gladly die.'

The king agreed. He ordered his servant to take the lad to the chamber where the dead princess lay in her coffin. In the meantime the master wood-carver stood in chains in the passage.

When Leshko saw the beautiful girl lying there in the coffin, he asked the servant to leave him alone with her a moment. The servant agreed and went outside. But when the master carver saw that Leshko had remained alone in the room, he was curious to see what he would do. He went up to the door and looked in through the keyhole. He saw the lad approach the dead body and pull out a pocket knife, point the blade at the princess's finger and prick her with it. That very instant the girl rose from the coffin. 'Where am I? And who are you? I don't think I know you,' said the princess in bewilderment. 'I've surely never seen you before in my life.'

But Leshko took her by the hand and led her towards the door. The carver hastily stepped back. Leshko took the princess to the king, whose delight on seeing her alive and well knew no bounds. He rewarded the lad handsomely and thanked him most profoundly. He also ordered his men to release the carver.

Now the master carver could make no sense of what he had observed in the chamber, but he said nothing to his partner. He also envied him his handsome reward, but held his peace and just cheated him more than before.

Not long afterwards the little prince was taken mortally ill and soon the funeral bells began tolling in the city — the prince had died. 'Now then,' the woodcarver said to himself, 'this time I'll go and try my luck!' He went to the king and begged to be allowed to spend a few moments alone with the dead boy. The king recalled that his partner had expressed the identical wish previously and that the princess had been brought back to life. So he willingly agreed to the carver's request.

The moment the carver was alone with the corpse, he pulled out a pocket knife and cut the prince's hand. But nothing happened. He cut a second time, but still the prince didn't stir.

The terrified fellow began screaming. The servants came running in, and when they saw what had happened, they bound the man and threw him into prison. When the king learned what had happened, he condemned the carver to death — the execution was to take place publicly. But just as the hangman was about to carry out the sentence, a dark-haired lad ran out of the crowd and fell at the king's feet, 'Mercy, mercy, Your Majesty! The man is innocent! Please spare his life and I promise I'll bring your son back to life for you!'

The king recognised the lad as the one who had brought his dead daughter back to life previously. So he ordered the carrying out of the sentence to be delayed, and he himself led Leshko to his son's coffin, though he didn't want to leave him alone with the boy. Leshko told him, however, that the only way for him to revive the prince was for him to be left completely alone with him, so the king finally went out of the room. But he stood waiting by the door, determined that in a moment he would return and see

what the lad was doing with the body. Scarcely a second had passed, however, when the door opened and Leshko appeared, leading the little prince, alive and well, by the hand.

What joy there was throughout the land! This time the king rewarded Leshko so magnificently that the lad was unable to carry home all the valuable presents and money he had received. The king had to give him a splendid horse, too. Leshko loaded his riches on the horse, and, having once again requested the king to release the wood-carver, he rode home.

The released carver fell on his knees to the lad and begged him, 'Please don't leave me now, please stay here as my son! From today, everything I own is yours, for indeed you have saved my life.'

But Leshko shook his head, 'I can't stay here, I must return to my own family, who need me. I know only too well that you have cheated me and spied on me, but I am not angry with you for that and I would like to leave you on terms of good friendship.'

'Stay at least just one more day, so that I can show you my gratitude,' begged the carver. At last Leshko agreed, saying he would wait to leave till the morning.

That evening the wood-carver arranged a grand farewell feast in Leshko's honour. He forced the lad to eat and drink to his heart's content; he kept kissing and embracing him and repeating how grateful he was to him for having saved his life. When he thought Leshko was not looking, however, he secretly poured a sleeping draught into his goblet. Now the lad still couldn't really trust him, so he didn't drink the proffered wine, and, unobserved, just poured it on the floor.

After the feast, the carver showed the lad to his room, but Leshko suspected betrayal. When the carver left, he didn't lie down. He took a cover from the bed and rolled it up in the shape of a body and placed it there in place of himself. Then he stepped back behind the door. Hardly an hour had passed, when the door slowly opened. The wood-carver's bearded chin appeared in the chink and behind it came a hand clutching a long knife. The wood-carver crept silently up to the lad's bed; then suddenly he raised his arm and plunged the knife into the rolled-up cover. Whereupon Leshko sprang from his hiding place, seized the knife from the astonished carver's hand and cried, 'So that is how you wished to requite me for my kindness!' Before the carver knew what was happening, Leshko had grabbed his pouch and money, had run out of the door and had locked it behind him. He swiftly led his horse from the stable, mounted and rode away.

He rode on and on . . . and finally one day he came to a region that seemed familiar. He saw the broad stream spanned by the long narrow footbridge and on the other side a thick forest. Leshko recognised it as the forest near the village where his parents lived. He hastily crossed the bridge, and as he rode over he looked down into the water and saw his own reflection there below. How he had changed during the time he had been away in the world! He was no longer the little boy whom the wicked farmer had driven away from home. On the horse sat a well-built handsome young lad. I wonder if my parents will recognise me, thought Leshko. And what is my little friend Lali doing, I wonder?

He rode on into the forest, immersed in his thoughts. Yes, he knew it well — as a lad he had often run about there hunting for mushrooms and wild strawberries. Suddenly he reined in and stopped the horse. There, in front of him, stood a peculiar white building. It looked like a chapel, but there seemed to be no windows or doors.

Suddenly — from out of nowhere — the old woman was standing there before him, the one who had refused to let him cross the bridge. In her hand she held the long cane with which she had struck his hand. She grinned at Leshko with her toothless mouth and said, 'I see you didn't do badly in the world, my lad. You look like a lord, and you have a fine horse — and what have you got there in the pouch?'

'Riches which I earned by honest labour, but with your help, Granny,' replied Leshko. 'I shall be glad to share it with you.'

'I don't need riches,' smiled the old woman, 'but I am glad that you are not greedy and ungrateful. For this reason I am sorry to say that sad news awaits you on your arrival home.'

'What has happened?' asked Leshko fearfully.

'You have returned too late,' said the old woman. 'Your parents died and were buried long ago, and your magic knife will be unable to bring them back to life. And the friend, whom you were thinking of just now, is also dead.'

'Lali!' cried Leshko. 'What happened to her?'

'Her parents wanted her to marry someone, but she insisted on waiting for you till your return. When her father kept on insisting, she decided to take poison. But before dying she wrote that they should build her a tomb in this forest,' the old woman said, pointing to the white building. 'They buried her there three days ago and walled it up.'

'Is there no way in which I could get inside and take a look at her?' asked Leshko.

'I think perhaps I can help you.' The old woman lashed the wall with her cane, and it fell away. When Leshko turned to thank her, the woman had disappeared. She had vanished as though swallowed up by the earth.

Leshko went into the tomb. In its centre, on a marble stand, lay a silver coffin without a lid. In the coffin lay Lali. He saw at once she was no longer the little lass whom he had known. And how lovely she was now! She looked as though she were sleeping.

Leshko pulled out the magic knife from his pocket and hesitated a moment before touching the small white hand with its blade. But the moment he did so, the dead one opened her eyes and looked at Leshko in surprise, saying, 'Who are you?'

'Don't you recognise me, Lali?' he asked reproachfully. The pink colour began coming back into her cheeks and she cried out in delight, 'Why, of course I do! You're my darling Leshko. So you came back to me after all!' Suddenly she looked round her, scared, and grew pale, 'What is this horrible place? How did we get here?'

'Let's go. I'll explain everything,' said Leshko. He took her by the hand and led her out. They were hardly outside when the round wall behind them closed again. And Leshko remembered he had left his magic knife inside. For a moment he regretted its loss, but he soon accepted the fact. The main thing was that Lali was alive again. She held

him firmly by the hand and said, 'You don't need to explain a thing to me, I know now what happened. I drank a potion of herbs. My parents thought I had died and buried me in this tomb, as I requested. But you found me, and I came back to life from pure joy.'

'Yes,' agreed Leshko, glad she had spared him the explanation. 'But now I must take you home to your father and beg him for his blessing.'

Lali shook her head. 'He would never allow us to get married,' she said sadly. 'Besides — I don't want to return home; I want to stay with you. My parents think I am dead and are sure to have bewailed me. Let's leave them to that belief and go away, somewhere where no one knows us.'

And that's just what happened. Leshko and his faithful Lali rode away to a far distant region. They bought a nice farm, settled down on it and lived happily together for many, many a day.

Terrible Angulimala

Little gypsy boy Nalu was the most inquisitive child alive, and his parents, friends and relations had a dreadful time of it, because he was always asking questions. He wanted to know why water was wet, why a stone thrown into the air falls down, why trees and grass are green, why the sun only shines by day, and the moon and stars by night.

One day his mother said to him, 'If you go on being so inquisitive, terrible Angulimala will come for you.'

'Who's that?' asked Nalu.

'A wicked ogre who has six fingers and thumbs on each hand and foot and a large bump on his forehead holding his third eye with which he can see everything going on in the world. He can't bear inquisitive people, because he himself is terribly inquisitive.'

'Where does this wicked ogre live?' Nalu wanted to know.

'On the highest mountain in the world,' replied his mother.

'Where is the highest mountain in the world?'

'At the end of the world.'

'Is the end of the world far away?'

'Of course it's far away.'

'What's it like there?'

'It's all snow and ice and rocks.'

'Where does this ogre live and what does he live on?'

'He lives in a cave where there are lots of precious stones, and he lives on inquisitive children, who bother their parents with stupid questions,' said the mother abruptly, and she pushed Nalu out of the cottage.

Nalu roamed around outside for a while till he saw an old gypsy sitting on the ground, mending a pot. 'Where is the end of the world, uncle?' he asked him.

'Follow your nose all the way and you'll get there,' growled the old fellow.

Nalu took his advice seriously and walked on and on and on and on — always following his nose. After a long time he came to a stream. Suddenly he saw a large black eel flying out of the water on to the bank. It wriggled about on the dry ground, vainly seeking a way back to its own element. Nalu sprang for it and pressed it to the ground with his body. That will make a fine supper, he thought with delight. But all

at once he heard the eel speaking in a human voice. 'Let me go,' it begged, 'I'm not an ordinary eel. I'm the son of the eel king and I'm just about to be married. I'm swimming for my bride, who will be impatiently waiting for me and would cry bitterly if you were to kill me.'

Nalu was good-hearted, and he didn't want to spoil the eel's wedding, so he let it go.

'For sparing my life, may you always be as agile and supple as I,' called the eel. It flicked its tail a few times in the water and was gone.

Nalu went on, always still following his nose, and he reached a high mountain. 'Are you the highest mountain in the world?' he shouted to it. 'The highest mountain in the world,' it echoed scornfully. 'Good gracious, no!'

'And is the highest mountain in the world still a long way off?'

'Yes, a long way still,' rumbled the mountain.

'And mountain, tell me, why are you red?' asked Nalu inquisitively.

'Red?' repeated the mountain. 'Probably because I have iron inside me.'

'Is iron a precious stone?' Nalu wanted to know.

'Iron isn't a stone but a metal,' answered the mountain, 'and that is more valuable than precious stones, because one can make ploughs, ploughshares and even swords from it. The iron in me is so valuable that with a sword forged from it, one would be able to overcome even the most powerful man in the world.'

'Even the wicked ogre called Angulimala, who lives on the highest mountain in the world?' asked Nalu.

'Even him.'

'Then give me a bit of your iron and I'll forge myself a sword with it and kill the ogre,' said the boy.

'With pleasure,' agreed the mountain. 'But do you know how to mine iron and forge a sword?'

'No, I'm afraid I don't,' admitted Nalu.

'Well first go and find out from someone,' advised the mountain. Nalu said thank you and went on. After a while he saw a little dwarf coming towards him. He was carrying a large stone on his shoulder about the size of a human head.

'Good day, sir,' said Nalu, greeting him. 'Give me that stone; I'll carry it for you a bit. I suppose it's rather heavy for you.'

'That's kind of you,' said the dwarf. He put the stone down and handed it to Nalu. 'If you'll carry it all the way home for me, I'll repay you well for your kindness.'

The stone really was heavy, but Nalu carried it right back to the dwarf's home. In any case, it wasn't very far. The dwarf lived in a cave, in front of which blazed a roaring fire.

'Thank you,' he said, when the lad put the stone down on the ground. 'That stone contains gold, that's why it's so heavy. I'll smelt it down and give you half for your pains.'

'You know how to smelt gold?' asked Nalu in admiration. 'I wonder if you would know how to smelt iron, too, and forge me a sword out of it.'

'But of course, there's nothing difficult about that; I'm a gnome, and I know all about that kind of work,' boasted the dwarf.

'Well then, instead of the gold, get me some iron ore from the Red Mountain and forge me a sword from it,' begged the lad. The dwarf promised he would. Then he brought out a basket of wild strawberries and hazel nuts and offered them to the boy. After their supper, they both went to sleep. But in the morning, when the lad woke, the dwarf was standing there beside him, holding an iron sword in his hand. 'This is what I promised you,' he said. 'What do you need the sword for?'

'I want to kill the terrible ogre Angulimala,' replied the lad. 'They say that in the cave where he lives, there are many precious stones. I want them, and I'm sure he won't give them to me in fair bargaining.'

'In that case I've got a request to make of you,' said the dwarf. 'If you succeed in your intention, will you rob the ogre of the third eye he has in the centre of his forehead in a large bump, and bring it to me?'

'Why not? I can promise you that, I'm sure,' agreed Nalu.

'I hope you'll keep your promise,' said the dwarf. 'And to help you, I'll give you some advice as to how to fight the ogre and overcome him. Angulimala has six fingers and thumbs on each hand and foot. His strength and size is embodied in the sixth finger, or rather the thumb. When you attack him, first cut off his four thumbs, and by this means you'll weaken him so much, you'll be able to kill him easily.'

Nalu thanked the dwarf, took the sword, and set off on his way. On taking his leave the dwarf said, 'Remember this: the promise you gave me you must fulfil; otherwise, we shall be enemies for life.'

'What I've promised, I'll carry out,' the lad assured him.

Nalu travelled on for weeks, months, years . . . Indeed, he didn't even notice that during all this time he had become a big, handsome young man. One day he came to a city all decorated with white flowers. Flags were flying from the roofs and there was music everywhere. Nalu asked the people what they were celebrating. They told him that in honour of the eighteenth birthday of his daughter, princess Lakshmi, the king was holding a great festival. The climax of the celebration would be the sacred ball game.

Nalu wanted to know what sort of ball game this was. Several young people willingly offered to instruct him in it. They took him to a great lawn amidst palm trees. Each player had a small golden ball in his hand. Nalu received one, too.

First of all, each player had to bounce his ball on the ground. When the ball bounced up, the player had to hit it with the back of the right hand into the air, and when it came down again, he had to catch it and throw it up again skilfully with the left, so that the ball was permanently flying up and down, faster and faster. As soon as someone failed to catch the ball and it fell on the ground, the player was out of the game and the rest continued.

The game demanded great dexterity and agility. Nalu soon learned it and was the winner in the first round. His fellow players were most amazed. They said he had learned the game so well, that he could calmly ask to be put in the group which would play with the princess herself. And so Nalu went with them to the royal palace.

The ball game took place in a big courtyard in the centre of a white colonnade, where a platform had been set up inlaid with precious stones. Boys and girls all dressed in white took their places on this platform. Among them were Nalu and the princess Lakshmi. The latter couldn't take his eyes off beautiful Lakshmi. She was dressed in glittering silken taffeta and over her hair she wore a white veil studded with pearls and precious stones. Golden bracelets sparkled on her arms and legs.

The princess's group began playing. Lakshmi was indeed the best of the players. She threw the quivering ball up and down in the air with great speed, caught it again and again, until in the end only she and Nalu remained on the stage. For a long time they threw the balls up and down like golden lightning, till, finally — the ball slipped from the princess's hand and fell to the ground between the pillars. Lakshmi let out a cry of disappointment. And Nalu, writhing like an eel, sprang between the pillars, picked up the ball and threw it back to her. She was not expecting it, so missed it again. Thus Nalu, even though he had returned the ball to the princess, became the winner.

Lakshmi, who was not accustomed to losing, didn't look any too kindly on her competitor. She asked him gruffly who he was. When she heard he was a foreigner and had only learned the game quite recently, she was even more disgruntled. But as she didn't wish to be impolite to a stranger, she asked him where he was going. As soon as she heard about the terrible Angulimala, her face brightened and she exclaimed, 'If you succeed in

killing the ogre, I've got one request of you. Please bring me the great diamond on his forehead, which they say he hides in a large lump there!'

Nalu shook his head. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'I cannot fulfil this request of yours. Angulimala has a third eye in the lump on his forehead, and I've already promised it to someone else.'

Lakshmi was offended; she was not accustomed to having her requests rejected. Nalu was most upset about it, but what could he do? He collected his things and left the city. Fortunately the highest mountain in the world was not all that far from there. When Nalu reached it, he saw it would by no means be child's play to climb. It was very high and very steep. But thanks to his eel-like agility and suppleness he finally succeeded. He found the ogre's cave and shouted to him, 'Come out, terrible Angulimala, and show yourself! I challenge you to a fight!'

The ogre appeared. He was four heads taller than Nalu. In the centre of his forehead he had a large lump as big as a chicken's egg, and his third eye swam in it like a vast diamond. On each hand and foot he had six fingers. Nalu swung his sword and with one blow cut off the monster's right thumb. The ogre roared terribly and yet was at once a bit smaller; he was now only three heads taller than Nalu. The lad smote again and cut off the thumb on his left hand. Angulimala roared again and was now only two heads taller than Nalu. Quick as lightning, the lad cut off the big toe of his right foot. By now Angulimala was only a little bit taller than his opponent. And when, immediately after that, the lad cut the second and last big toe off his left foot, the ogre shrank to the size of a little man and Nalu easily overcame him and killed him. He took the third eye, and when he looked into it, it seemed to him as though he could see all sorts of pictures. He remembered the dwarf to whom he had promised the eye, and the moment he thought about him, the picture in the eye took definite shape and Nalu saw the dwarf sitting by the fire smelting gold. So that's how it is, he said to himself, and then he remembered the princess. In an instant the picture had changed. In place of the dwarf, Nalu could now see Lakshmi. She was dressed in man's clothes and seated on a horse. She was wearing an iron helmet from which there floated a long white plume, and in her hand she held a sword. Behind her stood long ranks of armed soldiers.

That's odd, thought Nalu. But he didn't want to stay on top of the mountain long, so he stuffed the diamond eye into a pocket and entered the ogre's cave. It was indeed studded with jewels and precious stones: diamonds, rubies, sapphires and pearls. Nalu took away as many as he could carry and hastened down the mountain. He had hardly reached the road again, before he was confronted by a large army marching towards him. At its head rode a woman in man's clothing, wearing a helmet with a long white plume. It was Princess Lakshmi. She had decided to come to meet the man who had intended

to kill the ogre, and she was going to take from him what he had refused to give her voluntarily.

The soldiers fell on Nalu with drawn swords. Nalu drew his sword, too. He began cutting down the ranks of the enemy till he reached their commanderess. None of the blows rained on him by the soldiers did him any harm; they just glanced off him as though off smooth steel. When he reached the horsewoman, he took hold of her horse's bit in one hand, put his other round her waist and swung into the saddle behind her. Before the astonished girl knew what was happening, he was racing away with her at tremendous speed.

Soon the army was far behind them, and when Nalu saw that they could no longer be overtaken, he reined in and said, 'You wanted me to be killed by your soldiers so that you could take the diamond from the ogre's forehead. For that I shall kidnap you, and you will be my wife, whether you like it or not.' Lakshmi looked at him, smiled and said, 'I'll be your wife of my own free will; you don't have to kidnap me. I liked you the moment you beat me at the ball game. But never mind who you've promised the ogre's third eye to. Don't give it away; keep it for yourself. In it you can see everything that is going on in the world and what everyone is thinking.'

Nalu, however, couldn't break his promise to the dwarf, and he told Lakshmi about it. She said, 'You bother about some kind of dwarf! If you marry me, you'll be a king and you won't have to be afraid of anyone. I am very inquisitive, too, and I want you to keep the stone. We'll look at it together.'

In the end she succeeded in persuading Nalu. He took the princess home and soon there was a splendid wedding. The young couple spent their time in pleasing entertainments. They often played the game with the golden balls. Likewise, they often looked into the enchanted stone. Whoever or whatever they were thinking of, there would immediately be a picture of it in the stone. It amused them immensely. But after a time they really just didn't know what more to think of. Whereupon pictures began to appear in the stone which upset and distressed them. There was much ugliness and poverty in the world. One day they saw a city which was overrun by the plague. People were dying there. Another time they saw a stretch of countryside flooded with water in which many bodies were floating; or it would be a city laid waste by a terrible earthquake. One day Lakshmi told her husband that she didn't want to look at these horrible pictures any more and asked him to throw the stone away. Nalu wanted to look for a last time at what was happening at home and to see how his parents were faring. He looked at the stone and thought of his mother. There he saw her lying in bed with a flushed face. He took fright.

'I must go home; my mother is seriously ill,' he told his wife. Lakshmi started crying. 'You want to leave me,' she reproached him. But Nalu assured her he would return

at once, as soon as he had bought medicines to cure his mother. 'Our family is poor, and they haven't enough money for medicines,' he said. 'I can't let my mother die like that.'

Nalu took the swiftest horse in the stable and raced away towards home. When he reached the Red Mountain, he called out, 'Greetings to you, mountain!' But the mountain didn't answer. So he rode on and suddenly — from out of nowhere — there was the dwarf in front of him. He stepped in his path and said, 'So you've come at last, Nalu. I wonder whether you've brought me what you promised me?'

'Out of my way,' answered Nalu impatiently, 'and don't delay me! I'm in a hurry. My mother is dangerously ill.'

'I know,' said the dwarf. 'It was I that inflicted the illness on her, to punish you for keeping the stone from the ogre's forehead for yourself. And I would have you know, your mother will never recover and will die, if you don't give me the stone.'

'You liar!' cried Nalu. 'I've plenty of money and will buy her the best medicines possible.'

'They won't help her,' grinned the dwarf. 'If you don't give me the stone which I asked for at once, your mother will die this instant, and you'll never see her again.'

'Well, take it then!' Nalu pulled the stone out of his pocket and threw it to the dwarf, who caught it dexterously as it flew through the air, and his eyes sparkled with delight. 'You can ride on now!' he said. 'I could also fail to keep my word if I chose, but your mother is a good woman. I don't want to harm her for not having taught you to behave like a man. If a man gives his word of honour, he should keep his promise, or he's a rotter.' With these words the dwarf vanished.

Nalu rode on till he reached home. When he knocked at the door of the family cottage, an old wrinkle-faced woman opened the door. It was his mother, but she didn't recognise him. 'Who are you?' she asked. Nalu embraced her with a cry, 'Don't you know me, Mother? It's me, Nalu!' She looked at him a long while and then fervently kissed and embraced him. She told him everything that had happened during his long absence away from home. 'I've been very ill,' she said, 'and I thought I would die. But a few days ago I suddenly felt better. I got up, and from that time I've felt quite well and active again.' Whereupon Nalu realised that the dwarf had not been lying and that he had kept his word, and mentally he felt very ashamed of the way he had treated him. He presented his mother with all the precious stones he had taken from terrible Angulimala's cave. Then, after enjoying his stay with her and his father and his brothers and sisters, he returned to his wife, who had meanwhile given birth to a handsome little prince.

Ori's Sword

Once upon a time there was a kingdom that was so small that no one knew anything about it and so poor that the rest of the world took no notice of it. Now in this kingdom you could count the rich people on the fingers of your hands, but the poor were everywhere, like flies. And the poorest of them all was a wood-cutter who lived in the forest. His wife was a gypsy, and as a dowry she had brought her husband a tiny little son, who had the strange name of Ori. Who really was his father, no one knew.

Ori was different from the other children of his age. He never played with them. He just lay all day long at home behind the stove. By the time he was eighteen, he was a great mountain of a fellow. His face was red and chubby and his hands were like shovels. But he was solitary and spoke little.

In a neighbouring village there was a church, and near the church for years there had lain an enormous stone. One day some lads on their way back from church began arguing as to who was the strongest and who could roll the stone away. One by one they tried to roll it, but quite in vain. Finally they managed it by their combined forces. But beneath the stone there yawned a terrible deep pit, out of which a dragon with two heads suddenly emerged!

The terrified lads took to their heels, but one of them didn't succeed in getting away. The dragon waved its long paw with its long sharp claws at him, seized him and gobbled him up.

From that moment the people stopped going to the church, for from the open pit the dragon was waiting to pounce, and anyone who went near was doomed.

There was panic throughout the region. The people sent messengers to the king with news about what was happening and begging for help. Now the king had an only daughter of whom the oracles had predicted at birth that she would marry a hero who was tremendously strong. By now the princess was almost eighteen years old and she was very beautiful, but none of the knights who had asked for her hand so far had been particularly strong, so she had refused them all. When the princess heard about the dragon, she begged her father to proclaim that the man who succeeded in killing the monster would be her husband. So the king had it proclaimed throughout the land that whoever would kill the monster would become his son-in-law

and his successor. When the news finally reached the woodcutter's cottage, Ori, who had been lying behind the stove and dozing and had heard the story half in his sleep, got up and said to his mother, 'Mother, go to the king and tell him I'll kill the dragon if he'll have a sword forged for me ten metres long and two metres wide at the hilt.'

Then he calmly lay down and went to sleep again.

His mother got up and went right away to see the king. When she had given him the message from her son, the king asked, 'Who in fact is your son?'

'He's no ordinary person,' replied the gypsy. 'I am not allowed to reveal his father's name, but he is stronger than the strongest of men.'

'Very well,' said the king, 'I'll have the sword forged as he requested, but if he fails to kill the dragon, he'll lose his own head instead.'

When Ori heard what the king had said, he didn't utter a word, just nodded, as if to say that everything would be all right.

The king summoned the best blacksmiths and swordsmiths from the whole country and ordered them to forge a sword ten metres long and two metres broad at the hilt. It was a terrifying weapon when it was finished, and no one could even lift it. Everyone was curious to see the person who had ordered the sword. The most curious of all was the princess. She believed that he must be the hero who had been ordained by fate to be her husband.

When the king sent Ori the message that the sword was ready, the young fellow came down from behind the stove and lazily stretched his limbs. He was so enormous that he had to bend so as not to hit his head on the ceiling. He went out and set off for the palace, just as he was, uncombed, unwashed and barefoot. The sword lay in the great castle courtyard, where the best blacksmiths and swordsmiths from the whole country had carried it by their combined strengths. The king and the princess stood on the balcony impatiently watching for the fellow who was to come for the sword. When they saw the dirty, ragged-trousered strong man, they were disappointed. But when Ori lifted the enormous sword as easily as if it were a feather, they were all struck dumb. Ori, for his part, took no notice of anyone. He picked up the sword, put it over his shoulder and calmly walked off.

When Ori reached the dragon's pit, the dragon was not in sight; it was asleep.

'Ho, there, out you come!' shouted Ori into the pit. The dragon woke up and lumbered out. But when it saw Ori with his long sword standing there, it obviously took fright and wanted to crawl back into the pit again. Ori, however, swung his sword and with one blow of the weapon smote off one of the monster's horrible heads. Whereupon the remaining head began complaining, and begged, 'Spare me, my good

fellow! I promise you I'll climb back into the ground and will never appear on its surface again.'

'No, I can't do that,' replied Ori, 'I can't spare you, because the king, who had this sword forged for me, wants me to kill you. If I don't do so, I'll lose my head myself.'

'Well then, at least do me a small favour,' begged the dragon. 'Cut me in two halves and throw them back into the pit and roll the big stone over it again.'

'Yes, I can do that,' nodded Ori, and he was about to swing his sword again. 'Just one more thing!' called the dragon anxiously. 'Promise me that a year from today you'll come back here and roll the stone away.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' replied Ori gruffly.

'That way you would save my soul,' insisted the dragon. 'In a year's time my body will have rotted completely, and I shall not be able to harm anyone, but my soul would remain imprisoned in it, unless you let it go free. Have pity! It won't hurt you and you'll be helping me.'

'Very well,' agreed Ori, 'I'll do as you wish.'

'And don't forget your promise!'

'Once I've given my word, that goes,' growled Ori. He swung once more and cut the dragon in two halves, picked them up on the sword, using it as a spade, and threw them into the pit. Then he rolled the big stone back in place and went home.

As soon as the people heard that the dragon was dead, there was great joy in the land. It was only the king who was not happy, thinking of the fellow to whom, according to his promise, he was to give his only daughter. Night and day he pondered how he could avoid fulfilling the promise when the gypsy would come for the princess. But the days passed and Ori didn't claim the promised reward.

Something else happened, however. The powerful ruler of the neighbouring land declared war on the king. As the enemy was much stronger and better armed, it caused the king much worry. He ordered all men throughout the land to be called to arms — Ori also had to join up. When his mother told him this, he climbed down from behind the stove, where he had been sleeping, and went out. On the ground behind the cottage lay the long sword, which was the only reward Ori had kept for having killed the dragon. He hadn't been in the least interested in the princess, and that was why he hadn't claimed her. He touched the blade of the sword with his finger, trying it for sharpness. Suddenly a strange person was standing there in front of him saying, 'Are you going into battle, my son?'

'Who is your son?' growled Ori.

'You are, because I am your father,' replied the stranger.

'Really? And why didn't you make yourself known to me till today?' asked the young fellow.

'Because I am not an ordinary person, I am the powerful spirit Orias,' replied the other calmly. 'Now that I see you are getting ready to go to war, I want to provide you with armour and a horse. I have already provided the sword.'

'The king had that forged for me,' objected Ori.

'But if it hadn't been for the strength I gave you at your christening, you would have never been able to wield it,' answered Orias. Then he clapped his hands and — from out of nowhere — there was a fine steed standing before them with gold halter, gold horseshoes and a splendidly ornamented saddle.

'Your horse is named Sirka,' said Orias. 'It goes faster than the wind and can fly through the air like a bird. Under its saddle you will find a pouch with the clothes you should wear. But now I can stay no longer; my time is up.' Whereupon, following these words, the spirit seemed to evaporate like smoke.

Ori was greatly enchanted with the magnificent horse. He hastily washed and dressed himself in the attire he found under the saddle. It was a knight's suit of armour and in the pouch he also found a pair of beautiful riding boots with golden spurs. When fully dressed he was unrecognisable. Then he sprang on the horse's back, seized the long sword and rode off.

Meanwhile the king had heard news that the enemy was approaching, and he rode out with his hastily assembled army to meet him. The princess accompanied her father part of the way in a carriage and was very sad, as she was afraid the king would lose the battle. She bade farewell to him at a crossroads and was returning home all in tears, when suddenly she noticed a knight on a magnificent horse riding towards her. She gave the order to halt, and as the rider approached, she spoke to him, 'Whither are you going, sir knight?'

'To the war to help our king,' replied Ori. The princess became more cheerful. Then she noticed the sword Ori was holding in his hand and she recognised it at once. 'How's this?' she cried in amazement. 'Surely this is the sword my father ordered to be made for the man who killed the dragon?'

Only now did Ori realise he was speaking to the princess. The time before, when he had been at the castle, he had taken no note of her and so he could not have known how beautiful she was. Now he was sorry he had not claimed her hand.

'Was it you who killed the dragon?' asked the princess. Ori was at a loss to explain, and only nodded. Whereupon the princess took a large silk kerchief from her bag, gave it to him and said, 'I'll give you this as a pledge. If my father is victorious with your help, come back with him and show me the kerchief. Then I shall know that it is you whom

the fates ordained for me.' Having said this, she waved to Ori and the carriage drove away. Ori couldn't take his eyes off it till it had disappeared from sight. Finally he pulled himself together and spurred his horse. The horse rose in the air and flew like a bird.

Suddenly Ori saw below him the regiment of the army being led by the princess's father himself. A great black cloud was swiftly approaching it from the distance. That was the far more numerous army of the enemy. When the two armies were closely approaching one another, Ori ordered, 'Down, Sirka!' Instantly they dropped to the ground. Ori rode at a gallop and a moment later found himself face to face with the enemy commander. It was the powerful neighbour himself. Ori wielded his enormous sword — and the ruler's head rolled in the dusty road. Then he struck with his sword to left and right and the enemy soldiers fell from their horses like ripe pears from a tree.

The rest of the soldiers, on seeing their king defeated, turned their horses and fled. Ori didn't follow them, he let them escape, and turned his horse and rode slowly back to meet the princess's father. The king, who had seen it all, was quite astounded. When the unknown protector rode up to him, the king offered him his hand and said with deep emotion, 'Thank you, courageous knight! You've saved me and our whole country. Tell me who you are, and if you are not yet married, I'll give you my only daughter as a wife and make you my successor.'

Ori frowned. 'As far as I have heard,' he said slowly, 'you've already promised her to the fellow who killed the dragon, haven't you?'

'I don't remember,' said the king.

'Then you've a very short memory,' said Ori.

'As a matter of fact I remember now, I did promise her to him,' said the king a bit confused. 'But a promise given to such a vagabond cannot be taken seriously. He probably realised that himself, because to this day he has never yet claimed my daughter.'

'And suppose he should claim her?' asked Ori.

'I would never give her to him,' proclaimed the king.

'And your royal word?'

'Ah well, to a gypsy like that . . .' But the king got no further. Irate Ori wielded his sword and cried, 'Do you recognise this weapon?'

Only now did the king notice the sword, for after the fight Ori had fastened it to the saddle and was dragging it behind him. The king recognised it at once, but as it would never have occurred to him that the gypsy and this knight in the splendid suit of armour were one and the same person, he said, 'I don't know how you came by this sword, but if you despatched the fellow to eternity who killed the dragon and took the sword from him, I've all the more reason to give you my daughter in marriage and to name you as my successor.'

Whereupon Ori's hand trembled with rage and the sword slipped from it, its blade grazing the king's leg as it fell, wounding him above the knee. The king cried out in pain. Ori also was shocked. Though the king had profoundly offended him, he had not wanted to hurt him. Ori, seeing the king bleeding, pulled from his pocket the princess's silken kerchief, in one corner of which was a golden embroidered royal crown. He tore it in half, throwing one half to the king and shoving the other half back in his pocket.

'Bind your wound with this and tell the princess, that if she wants to marry the man who first won the right to her hand, let her come for him herself.' Then he spurred his horse with his golden spurs and rode swiftly away.

When the king reached home, he told the princess what had happened. The princess, recognising the half of her kerchief wound round the knee, at once knew what to do. She dressed in her most resplendent clothes, called for her carriage and ordered the coachman to drive her to the cottage where the gypsy lived who had killed the dragon.

Ori was just at that moment chopping wood in front of the cottage. He was once more dressed in his old ragged clothes, he was barefoot and dishevelled. But beside him on the ground lay his great long sword, and his horse Sirka was tethered in the yard. The princess went straight up to him, offered him her hand and said, 'My father gave me your message and so I am here.'

Ori wished to wipe his face clean, but as he had no cloth, he pulled out the half of the princess's kerchief with the golden embroidered crown. Whereupon the princess smiled and said, 'I know it was you who killed the dragon and you who helped my father win the war. I guessed it at once, as soon as I first saw your sword. There could only be one man who could succeed in wielding that, and he would be the strongest of all strong men, who is ordained for me by destiny. Come with me, and I'll introduce you to my father as my bridegroom.'

But Ori shook his head, 'Your father called me a dirty gypsy and said he would never let me marry you.'

'Leave that to me!' replied the princess. She took him by the hand and walked over to the carriage.

As they drove to the castle, they met the king, who was out riding, looking for his daughter. When he saw her sitting in the carriage beside the shabby-looking Ori, he cried out angrily, 'Are you out of your wits? Who is that riding with you?'

'The hero and the strongest of the strong men, who was ordained for me by Fate,' replied the princess.

The king was very angry. 'I won't allow you to marry such a ragged fellow,' he cried. 'I won't live under one roof with such a gypsy.'

Back in the royal castle courtyard the princess got down from the carriage, took Ori

by the hand and led him to a small wooden building opposite the royal castle. 'This is where we'll live together, if the king won't let us live with him,' said the princess.

And so the princess settled down and was very happy. About a year later she gave birth to a son; he had coal-black eyes and golden hair. But the very day the little lad was born, Ori remembered that it was exactly a year since he had killed the dragon. He also recalled his promise, and said to his wife, 'Don't be angry, but I have to leave you and finish off a certain task.'

'What task?'

'A year ago I promised someone to do something which I can only do this very day,' replied Ori. 'I am not one of those who doesn't keep his word; so I must go now, but I'll soon be back.'

Ori left the hut and set off for the church. He rolled back the great stone so that the dragon's soul might escape from the pit where the dragon's body lay in halves. But instead of this happening, a hideous ogre sprang from the pit, seized Ori by the neck and screamed, 'You idiot! I wheedled a promise out of you which will cost you your life!' Ori knew that the ogre was far stronger than he, that he could never stand up to him. Why was I so careless as not to bring at least my sword with me, he thought. The ogre threw him into the air and flung him with great force to the ground. The unfortunate fellow fell head first on to a stone. The ogre laughed fiendishly, and, seeing Ori lying there lifeless, he fled away. He crossed broad rivers as though they were rivulets and high mountains as though they were mole hills.

When a long time passed, and Ori did not return home, his wife began to have fears for him. She wrapped up her little son, took him in her arms and hastened to the wood-cutter's cottage. She hoped she might find her husband there. But the old gypsy woman said to her, 'I haven't seen my son from the time you took him away from here. It was not very kind of you never to have come to see us. We have been so longing to see him.'

When Sirka, tied up in the yard, heard the name of his master, he whinnied sadly.

'There now, even the animal is longing for him,' said the mother. She went outside, stroked the horse and asked it, 'What has happened to your master, my pony, do you happen to know?'

Sirka whinnied again, but this time more cheerfully.

'I'll untie him and we'll follow him; perhaps he will lead us to Ori,' said the gypsy woman. She untied Sirka and the horse sprang up at once and trotted from the yard. The two women hastened after it. The princess, carrying the child in her arms, was soon out of breath and so the mother took the child from her, to give her a rest. But the horse did not go far. By the church it came to a halt and the two women saw the deep pit in the

ground. Beside it lay Ori with a broken head. The princess knelt and embraced the lifeless body of her husband, crying, 'Wake up, Ori, my beloved, my hero!' But the man didn't stir.

The gypsy laid the child down in the grass and also bewailed her dead son. The infant gurgled and played with the field flowers. Suddenly two small shiny snakes crawled out of the pit. One carried a green herb in its mouth. The other was trying to get it from him. In fighting for the herb they attracted the attention of the child. It was a strange child. Though it had only just come into the world, it was already watching and taking notice of what was going on around it. And it not only noticed the snakes, but also understood their language.

'Give it to me, pleasssse!' hissed the snake angrily at the one which had the herb.

'No! I sssstole it for my sssson, who wasssss ssssquasssshed by a sssstone and issss dead,' hissed the other.

'I mussst have it for my ssssisssster, who'ssss dead too, I mussst, I mussst!' hissed the first snake. Whereupon the child grabbed a lump of earth and threw it at the quarrelling snakes. They got such a shock that the one, which held the herb in its mouth, dropped it and quick as lightning slithered into the pit followed by the other. The child picked up the herb and laughed out loud.

The princess looked round in astonishment. Seeing the laughing child, she said in amazement, 'Well, I never! My son is not a day old yet and he's laughing. He's laughing, and here beside him lies his father, dead . . .' She picked the child up in her arms and carried him to Ori. 'Just look at your father!' she said sadly. 'You'll never know what he was like when he was alive.' Whereupon the child stretched out its hand holding the herb and lightly touched the dead man's face with it. In that instant Ori opened his eyes and, seeing his wife and child above him, he sprang up and embraced them, 'What happened?' he asked after a moment. 'I thought the ogre which I released from the pit had killed me, but now I feel better and stronger than ever before.'

The princess, thoroughly happy now that her husband had suddenly come to life again, began telling him what had happened. But the old gypsy woman, though she was delighted, too, that her son was alive again, carefully took the herb from the child's hand and said, 'This is a very rare herb; it grows deep underground and has the power of bringing anything to life which is dead. I can't imagine how your little son got hold of it, but it was certainly that which brought you back to life.' She wrapped the herb carefully and hid it in her dress.

At that moment Ori saw Sirka. He sprang on its back and called out, 'Start for home, I'll catch you up!' Before the women knew what was happening, Ori and the horse were gone. They had hardly gone a few steps, before he was back again. But it was a

completely different Ori. He was dressed now in splendid knightly raiment, and in his hand he carried his long sword. As he rode up to them, he bent down, lifted his wife and child up into the saddle in front of him, and said to his mother, 'Goodbye, Mother! I'll soon be coming for you and Father, too.' He spurred the horse and they flew back to the castle.

The king was standing at the window, looking sorrowfully at the hut where his only daughter lived with the gypsy. He had been told that they had had a son, and the king was even more sorry now that he had been angry with his daughter. All said and done, the little lad was his grandson and the one successor to the throne. It is time we were friends, he said to himself, and just then he heard the clatter of horse's hooves. A moment later a knight on a fine steed rode into the courtyard, whom the king recognised immediately, but he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that the knight was holding his daughter with a child in her arms in his saddle. The king leaned out of the window —

a wonder he didn't fall — and shouted down, 'Hallo, sir knight! Come up here! You're all very welcome!'

The rider looked up, replying stiffly, 'I expect you've confused me with someone else, father-in-law. You see, I am the dirty gypsy, with whom you do not wish to live under one roof. That is why I shall never enter your house. But if you wish, you can come to us. I'll be pleased to welcome you under our roof as a friend.' With those words he sprang from his horse, helped the princess and the child down, and they all went into the little hut.

The king ran down the stairs and out into the courtyard. But — lo and behold! There at the other end of the courtyard, there was no wooden hut to be seen. Instead, there was a magnificent tall house, a hundred times more splendid than his old, battered castle, and in place of the courtyard between the two houses there yawned a deep black abyss. It was spanned at a great height by a strange-looking iron bridge. The bridge was not equally broad everywhere. At the end by the king's house it was as narrow as a plank, at the other end, which led to the balustrade of the house opposite, it was fairly wide. And then the king noticed that it was no ordinary bridge, but the iron sword which he himself had had forged.

Suddenly a woman and child appeared on the balustrade of the house opposite. She waved to the king and called out, 'Come over to us, Father!'

The king looked nervously at the narrow end formed by the point of the sword, leaning against his own house. But he made up his mind and stepped on to it. It swayed a little under his weight, because he was rather fat. But he carried bravely on, determined to get to the other side. When he finally reached the balustrade of the house opposite, the princess kissed and embraced him warmly and showed him her son. The king was delighted at seeing he had such a lovely, handsome grandchild. Then the princess led her father indoors and showed him their new home, which had been decorated inside with great splendour.

'How did you manage to build this house so fast?' asked the king. 'When I first looked out of the window, it wasn't there, yet by the time I had run down the stairs, it was already finished!'

'I don't know myself how it was possible,' replied the princess, 'but probably Ori's father, Orias, and his magic powers had something to do with it. But when you speak to him, don't mention it. He dislikes talking about it.'

Then Ori appeared. The king offered him his hand and said, 'Forgive me if I offended you. I let myself be misguided by your poor attire and didn't see you to be the courageous, dignified hero that you are. Please don't be angry with me for this, and I would gladly have you as my son and my successor.'

'I'm not angry,' said Ori, 'and please forgive me, too, for wounding you in the leg that time in anger. May the sword you had forged for me serve to link our houses with an iron bond of friendship. It should only be used in our defence and in the defence of our people.'

The two men then shook hands and embraced and the family celebrated a happy home-coming.

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